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Introduction

How Utopian Can Our Dreams Be?

V. Geetha

Writing in the wake of the Gujarat carnage of 2002, K. Balagopal wondered at the power of hatred and what it could achieve, and asked what was clearly not a rhetorical question:

> Can one teach love as easily as that? Radical-minded people feel insecure about such questions, for they could be fatal to our utopian dreams. But while dreams are all right, and probably also necessary, we should have the honesty to pare them down to realistic dimensions. If hatred is so easy to build and love so difficult, and an uneasy tolerance the most we achieve when we work for love, how utopian can our dreams afford to be? ('Reflections on "Gujarat Pradesh" of "Hindu Rashtra"', *EPW*, 1 June 2002).

In another context, reflecting on the persistent and graded inequality of the caste order, he noted that to rebel against one's caste superiors opens the gates of moral sanction for the rebellion of one's caste inferiors. He went on to say:

> Psychologically, the caste oppressor is not an unbridgeable alien—as he has to be to provoke outright rebellion—for he is a part of everybody's identity. To condemn oppression is to condemn at least a little bit of oneself ('A Tangled Web: Subdivision of SC Reservation in AP', *EPW*, 25 March 2000).

Then again, he wondered, as he examined the possibilities of

revolutionary success and what that might create, whether we would be able to sustain our sense of the common good, of mutuality, equality and justice in times of victory and abundance as we effortlessly do in times of anger and deprivation.

These questions—wistful, ironic and disturbing—may be viewed as important parts of his enduring legacy. His writings, from the early 1980s till his death in 2009, may be read in this light as complex and richly argued attempts to mark and achieve, ethically and politically, a measure of reflective, critical distance and openness when engaging with injustice and dreaming of utopia. Such distance, his writings make clear, has to be constantly fought for, argued out, and cannot afford to rest on or seek historical and philosophical guarantees of one kind or another.

Kandala Balagopal did not start out as a writer or commentator on contemporary politics or the life and times of the present. Like that other great modern Indian thinker, D.D. Kosambi, whom he read avidly, admired and wrote about, his training was in the sciences. With an M.Sc. and a Ph.D. in mathematics from the Regional Engineering College, Warangal, he proceeded to the Indian Statistical Institute in Delhi for postdoctoral research. Subsequently, he taught mathematics at Kakatiya University in Warangal from 1981 to 1985. This trajectory, not particularly remarkable for one born into a middle class brahmin family, turned in on itself during this period in his life. The political culture of Warangal—home to the naxalite left and resonant with debates around questions of class, justice and revolution—proved decisive in Balagopal turning away from an introspective life of the mind. Instead he came to train his acute intellect to identify, comprehend and critically examine key political and social concerns. He joined the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee in 1983, and became active in civil rights work centred at that time around extra-judicial killings of militant left cadres.

Civil liberties work provided Balagopal with a context and rationality to write, and write he did through nearly three tumultuous decades: on encounter deaths; struggles of agricultural labourers; the shifting dynamics of class and caste in the 1980s and thereafter in Andhra Pradesh; the venality and tyranny of the Indian state; the intractable politics of alienation and discontent that has been the lot of societies in the Kashmir Valley and the Northeast of India; on the importance of refiguring the caste order as one that denied the right of civil status and existence to vast numbers of its constituents; the centrality one ought to grant patriarchy in considerations of social injustice; the destructive logic of development that emerged in the India of the 1990s, dishonouring its citizens' right to life, liberty and livelihood.

It is hard to separate his writings into neat categories, for each theme informs the other. However, much may be gained in a heuristic and pedagogic sense by doing so—hence this attempt. This volume comprises texts that deal with representations and practices of class power, as it exists in tandem with state authority on the one hand and caste identities on the other. The etiology of this power, its political forms, social basis and cultural pretensions are matters that Balagopal continued to explore until his last days. His writings from the 1980s do this from the point of view of class struggle. From the 1990s onward he shifted gear and addressed inequality and injustice from the point of view of democracy, civil dignity and resistance—keeping in the foreground the systemic denial of all three in Indian caste society.

Balagopal's writing style is unique: dense, without being tiresome or obfuscating, and rich in detail, without the pedantry of footnotes. Thoughtful and ironic, reflective and urgent, he communicates as much through tone and inflection, as he does through argument and example, as the essays in this volume demonstrate. Being a bilingual scholar and writer, he moved easily in and between the worlds of Telugu and English, and in the process went on to produce a nuanced and layered analysis of whatever he set out to interrogate. The felicity with which he did this lent to his writings a richness that is seldom found in the work of those who write exclusively in English, and whose sense of the local therefore appears a translated version.

The Thought-World of Balagopal

This volume also introduces the reader to the thought-world of Balagopal as it changed and evolved through the years, to his brilliant and witty style of expression, and finally to his abiding humanity, his clear-cut sense of what ought to be challenged and cherished, feared and respected in the human condition, such as it is.

Balagopal's engagement with the world of civil rights and politics, democracy and communication exemplifies the critical politics that he espoused in varied ways. Intensely sensitive to the lessons of history, especially the struggles of poor and desperate people, of angry and politically organised groups, he travelled easily in and between different political and philosophical terrains. Inspired by naxalism in the late 1970s and into the 1990s, intellectually indebted to Kosambi's writings on Indian history and society, and politically and ethically attentive to the politics of feminist and dalit assertion in the 1990s, Balagopal refused dogma and shrill polemics just as he refused theory that did not heed the mess of history and practice.

During his years as secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, he came to know the grit and grime of class politics. This was also a time when he reposed good faith in the possibilities of radical politics and social change. Investigating so-called encounters that ended the lives of young fighters or political activists, writing against the abridgement of the right to speech under N.T. Rama Rao, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, enquiring into police violence in adivasi villages in the thick forests of Dandakaranya, horror-struck at the self-blinding arrogance of students resolutely opposed to reservation for the Backward Classes in Andhra Pradesh, angrily responsive to caste hatred that humiliated and murdered dalits, and troubled by the logic of the caste order that divided the poor and disenfranchised and pitted dalits against each other: he saw much and drew very important conclusions from all that he was witness to. His intimate knowledge of a dynamic, bloody and history-drenched social landscape enabled him to link geography and history, landscape and production relationships, labour and caste, and political action and cultural verities.

Such a mobile perspective is, in fact, physically palpable in the structure of his essays: often an essay begins with descriptions of roads, forests or railway tracks, or of microclimatic conditions. He literally leads the reader into a world whose boundaries are geographical and historical, part of the lay of the land, and which have been created over a period of time. Once in that world, we see its everyday both in terms of a long historical past, as well as in terms of a particular contemporary event or situation. Key aspects of this world are then unpacked into their constituent details, and once the landscape is laid out, much like a map, we are made to see patterns, and what appeared to be disparate elements show up linked, stretching backward and forward in time. Thus, fields sown with groundnut serve Balagopal to essay a wonderful vignette on medieval Rayalaseema, to draw out a political argument on how ruling classes and castes fare in such a landscape, and to indicate the possible fallout of class war in the event of a prolonged drought. It is almost as if field notes, jotted down in a night or in the course of a gruelling fact-finding mission, become points of entry into a world of ideas and events which eventually blend together.

Significantly, Balagopal paid close attention to cultural developments in the terrains he chose to study. Once again, we see him utilising the insights garnered from attending to rights violations to outline astonishing and wonderful arguments about class and culture. His analysis of the rise of the 'yellow' press in Andhra Pradesh is a case in point: everyday ethnography, class and caste analysis and his keen and perceptive marking of political will and dynamism—howsoever these may work in practice—

allow him to move beyond dismissive marxist arguments about the yellow press being an expression of petit-bourgeois outrage. Likewise, his references to religious faith, gods and puranic lore in contexts where you would least expect to find them allow us to see how religious sensibility reinvents itself in secular contexts, and often in the most tangential ways.

Consider, for instance, the opening paragraph of his essay on the murder of dalits in Karamchedu, 1985: a description of a loudspeaker's blare—comprising chants from the Bhagavad Gita—is not merely 'atmospheric' but actually deftly sets the ideological context for an inquiry into murderous caste violence. An essay on fascism begins with a seemingly innocuous description of an anti-fascist convention, meanders into reflections on the worship of Ayyappa, and you slowly begin to see connections between religious cults, plebeian discontent, cultural desperation and political hope, and the manner in which fascism could potentially integrate these incongruous elements into a political programme. An appraisal of Indira Gandhi's tenure as prime minister morphs into a theoretical meditation on the importance of the superstructure, of cultural and literary expression in times of class warfare.

While much of what he said in the 1980s and until the mid-1990s owed a great deal to the politics and practice of naxalism, he also consistently looked beyond it. This was a decade that witnessed, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of state socialisms, a relentless questioning of socialist theory, especially of class struggle and the relevance of the organised working class in countries like India. Questions of revolutionary agency were raised by those in movements that mobilised across and beyond class identities and by scholars who sought to theorise these 'new social' movements. Feminist and dalit critiques of marxism insisted on the relative autonomy of patriarchy and the caste order as systems of oppression. Balagopal lent his keen ear to these developments, and responded to them with verve and from a vantage point gained from a close knowledge of the naxalite groups in Andhra Pradesh. His sardonic and witty style allowed him to both fend off as well as engage with critics of naxalism with grace and brilliance. Yet, in almost every critical instance, he reassembled ideas that he found useful, but which were not strictly part of his political and intellectual heritage, to rethink his own position with greater rigour.

This is particularly evident in his debate with Gail Omvedt on farmers' movements and the caste question: while agreeing with Omvedt that caste divided rural society in important ways, he refused to define the sensibility that pitted shudra peasant against dalit labourer as an instance of 'casteism'.

He did not agree that 'caste feeling' was merely that and could be addressed without creating new political contexts for dalits and shudras to come together. He did not, therefore, rush to assimilate caste differences to class antagonisms, as many leftist thinkers in the pre-Mandal world were wont to do. Instead, he argued, through the late 1980s, and even when he was not responding to Omvedt's ideas, that caste identities have to be precisely and historically understood. He pointed out that however stable they appeared, such identities were neither given nor immutable; that casteism had not always united the so-called shudras, and communist struggles in Andhra Pradesh had witnessed reddy fighting reddy and so on in innumerable instances. At the same time, he conceded that caste identities could be effectively mobilised and rendered provisionally immutable for diverse reasons—to countermand dalit labourers' demands and communist organising; when a dominant caste chose to defend its class interests by drawing to itself caste men and women through persuasive politics; when there did not exist political contexts and arguments that would help unite the poor shudra peasant and the dalit labourer.

In the post-Mandal decade, he refined his arguments even more: he declared that the caste order merited critical political attention on its own terms, and observed that it denied civil status to a considerable number of people, thereby depriving them of that identity which would help them challenge injustice in a democratic society. He argued too that casteism, like racism, must be considered a crime against humanity but did not ask for it to be assimilated into the latter. Rather he insisted on the uniqueness of caste-based discrimination, pointing to the divine sanction that continues to be claimed for it, and the hierarchy of differences and inequalities that sustains it. These years also saw him rethink the relationship between class and caste, as well as caste and gender, as we shall see.

Understanding Class, Caste and State

Balagopal's writings of the 1980s and 1990s had to do with a persistent set of themes: the most prominent of these was the making of the Indian ruling classes, and the histories and contexts that shaped them in post-independence India. He was particularly interested in marking and notating the relationship between the state and the ruling classes, democracy and class interests, and the political choices available to thinking citizens. These themes emerged as pertinent in his writings of the period, much of which had to do with events in Andhra Pradesh. Writing on what were clearly local developments, whether these had to do with encounter deaths in Telangana, the rampant casteism of the privileged Telugu castes, changing

social relationships in rural Andhra, and the emergence of new political movements in the region, he produced arguments that could be validly and critically redeployed in other contexts. Inexorably located in the specificities of material history as it was, his theorising, on that account, was expansive and fundamentally heuristic.

Resolutely materialist in his approach, and superbly dialectical, he was at the same time sensitive to what escaped marxist theory-making: this is evident in how he addresses class, for instance. Class for him is never simply a theoretical given, the Indian ruling class is thus not an entity that may be easily grasped through received categories such as 'monopolist bourgeois' or 'semi-feudal'. Rather he views it as vastly heterogeneous and contentious, whose character, political force and social interests are governed by the exigencies of geography and history, and at the same time by the modern Indian state and the caste order. Further, he distinguishes two strands of the Indian ruling classes: the monopoly capitalists and the conglomerate of landholding groups variegated and spread across the country, the so-called 'provincial propertied classes'. Significantly, he chose to investigate the making of these classes, their politics and privileges, their historic hour and their excesses.

In Balagopal's lexicon, the provincial propertied classes comprise diverse agricultural communities whose fiat runs over a vast amount of land and people and who congeal into a class on account of their unbridled desire to rule, to wield authority in a political as well as social sense. This desire, in turn, is expressed in and through a series of acts—from settling electoral battles at the point of a gun to murdering dalits to show them their place. In this sense, as Balagopal's analysis makes clear, they are extremely class conscious, and are historically knowable precisely because they express this consciousness in no uncertain terms: through idioms of caste-endowed conventional authority and through their successful subversion of democratic protocols and instruments. With respect to Andhra Pradesh, both the reddys and kammas constitute the agrarian 'gentry' but Balagopal makes it clear that they do not rule in quite the same manner. The harsh and rain-starved lands of the Rayalaseema reddys, for instance, render them as punishing feudal lords, whose history of violence and rule stands them in good stead as they extort and expand their wealth; while the rich wetlands of the Godavari and Krishna basins make the kammas a restless and nouveau landlord class that looks to multiply its fortunes and profits in any number of—non-agrarian—ways, and assert an authority that is less feudal and hegemonic, but nonetheless violent.

While the gentry rule, they draw to themselves others less endowed and

relatively powerless. Balagopal makes clear that landlords and peasants, each in their own way, and in specific and enumerable geographical and social conditions, work to advantage their pre-existing claims on the economy, based on custom and caste. Thus, even as they stand divided in sheer class terms, they are yet capable of coming together and in fact do, into a historic bloc cemented by affective ties of lineage and caste. Such a historic bloc, however, seldom becomes a class in itself. That is, there is nothing in the logic of its emergence that requires the landlords and peasants who constitute the bloc to evolve into agrarian capitalists. For one, there is no gainsaying that the wealth the propertied rural class of landlords earns would be channelled towards a given—capitalist—model of growth. In other words, farmers need not turn resolutely capitalist; they could equally well become government contractors, sour moneylenders, liquor dealers, movie-makers, rack-rentiers and self-aggrandising cultural producers. Further, as far as the rural class of property holders is concerned, neither its location in the production process nor its property claims and the control it exercises over labour may be seen as determinate—these are necessary conditions for its existence but never really sufficient to explain its will to power. Class, Balagopal makes clear, is as class does. And class, he warns, may not do what is expected of it in the grand unfolding of capitalist growth and progress. Rather, he notes, the ruling class may work with other and different goals in mind. Its venality and impunity may have as much to do with its caste context as with anything else. (I will return to this insight later in this introduction.)

Balagopal held this to be true of agrarian discontent as well. Neither reducible to anticipated trends in rebellion or revolution nor deducible merely from the historical trajectory of plans, policies and market behaviour, agrarian resistance, for him, is as agrarian resistance does. The political struggles of naxalite groups in Andhra Pradesh vary, Balagopal noted, and strategies that work in the forests would not in the plains, and contradictions that do not exist in one instance may rear up in another, requiring a different kind of struggle.

However, in Balagopal's analytical universe, consciousness was not all. He demonstrated how property, caste authority and alignment to state power shepherded and protected the class consciousness of the ruling classes, whereas landlessness, lower caste status and dependence on an ostensibly protective state shackled the class sense of the oppressed. Democracy notwithstanding, argued Balagopal, the state was chiefly placatory and guileful—his brilliant analysis of the Congress party in post-independence India, especially the strategic support it has extended to minorities and the poor, and its resolute refusal to form ties with the provincial propertied classes, marked the contour lines of this placatory politics in sharp and unmistakable detail.

Balagopal's deployment of class as an analytical as well as political category is rather unique. Class in sociological literature is often a descriptive category, whereas in economic analysis, even when underwritten by marxist political good faith, it exists rather hazily, and chiefly in terms of social and political responses to development plans, processes and targets. Empirical criticisms of class are directed against or in favour of professed political ideologies and the actual practice of political parties. But in these ways of talking about class, seldom is a class formation understood in its various contingent, historical and structural moments. Often, descriptions of the polity and economy miss out on the social and historical drama that drives either. As Balagopal noted, half-jokingly, Indian marxist analysis perhaps suffers from an obsession with the base rather than the superstructure, and this might have to do with the fact that most marxist analysts are economists. He noted, in this context, that the base–superstructure relationship has to be understood as complex, richly mediated and graspable only in its historical detail.

Even as he attempted to redefine class and grant a rich resonance to the class politics of 1980s' naxalism, Balagopal was acutely aware of the attractions and historical presence of non-class political radicalism. While he granted that social struggles did not always heed or express class consciousness, he did not agree that class relationships had therefore ceased to be important. The various social movements that crowded the political landscape of the late 1980s and early 1990s figured substantially in his discussions of class and caste, and he pointed out that it would not do to conflate a movement's ideological self-expressions with its substantive politics, or with its objective material interests. To Balagopal, the latter had to be taken into account in any analysis of social protest—his argument with those who saw in the farmers' movements of the late 1980s a cause for political hope and change was precisely on this account. As he saw it, the tense and intrinsic class and caste contradictions that underpinned the movement were almost never satisfactorily addressed, and when they were, they were termed inconsequential in light of the putative unity of the village or the rural world.

In the post-Mandal years, Balagopal had other things to say about what has since come to be called social movements: crucially, he came to rethink, in rather fundamental ways, the nature of class struggle. The anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh led by rural, landless women agricultural

workers, and the dalit assertion in the 1990s appeared to him to pose serious challenges to a politics that privileged class over all other identities and stressed class unity and democratic centralism above all else. He pointed out that such a privileging of class and party militated against communist radicals engaging with social movements on their own terms. Often, communists sought to advance strategic arguments to explain away or even deny the specificity of particular movements, as well as to co-opt them within the logic of a unified and grand communist struggle. Balagopal was clear that the problem had as much to do with communist theory as with communist practice, with a theoretical privileging of class as a category of analysis. It appeared important to him that communist radicals pay attention to struggles in all their concreteness, and work to link them together in ways that were neither deliberate nor geared towards an ill-formulated and ill-understood abstract goal. As he put it, self-directed movements of the oppressed foster a sense of the oppressed being masters of their own destiny and it was important that the left parties realised this.

Interestingly, both in the pre- and post-Mandal years, his reasoning was seldom caught up with issues of state power—that is, with the 'imperative' for radical movements to 'capture' state power. Since he granted primacy to political will and self-consciousness, he privileged moments of class assertion and resistance and the state figured in his analysis always and everywhere in relation to class. In his ideological critique of naxalism, and more generally marxism, which he began to outline in the 1990s and after, he wondered if capturing state power would, in all circumstances, usher in an era of freedom, or if it would not impose a new necessity in the name of an anticipated utopia. Would it be possible to sustain values such as freedom, equality and fraternity, nurtured in the course of struggle and in times of deprivation, in times of power and abundance? He posed this question in a spirit of both wistful hope and resignation.

Yet, it is clear from his writings of the 1990s and thereafter that he was no anarchist or communitarian. The tabling of the report of the Mandal Commission, set up to inquire into and recommend positive discrimination for the Backward Classes, and the responses that the report evoked led him to theorise the relationship of classes to the state somewhat differently. The Mandal report saw the country's privileged castes come up with highly prejudicial and hateful responses to what they perceived as an assault on their privileges. Invoking notions of merit and efficiency, they challenged the right of the Backward Classes to a share, however truncated and limited, of government employment. Balagopal unpacked these responses with clinical acuity, and with great ethical fervour wrote on the necessity of

reservation. Since the battle for reservation was fought in and through the institutions of the state, he scrutinised the state's actions closely. Taking his cue from the manner in which the state worked caste and faith politics to the advantage of its ruling classes, he came to examine more closely and in detail the state, state actors, their actions and the consequences that followed from these actions. In the process, he evolved a richly nuanced critical analysis of the state and its various organs, particularly the executive and the judiciary.

Even as he allowed his critical gaze to mark and evaluate the democratic potential of the Indian state, Balagopal was quick to note that the state's actions were not always singular or cynical. Often they emerged as responses to the struggles of politically conscious groups and were therefore not entirely predetermined. But he did not rest his argument there. He noted that it was important to distinguish between what the state might do in embattled circumstances—enact a law, announce a change in policy—and how acts of state translated in practice. Many times, he observed, ideological battles are required to merely defend the law or policy, irrespective of its application and usefulness. In this sense, he saw the state as a focus for struggles for justice—notwithstanding the fact that the state's very existence is closely linked to the ruling classes.

He deployed this understanding brought home to him (and to many of us) by the battles over reservation and the Mandal Commission to rethink the possibilities of bourgeois democracy. He drew a distinction between juridical and social realities, and argued that the juridical upholding of democratic values is derived from the Constitution of India and seldom from social sanction or consensus. While the latter alone could win social justice battles in the here and now of politics, the law, indeed the juridical realm, could be useful in producing novel notions of right and wrong, and of what might be permissible. His writings on reservation in general, and in particular on reservation within dalit communities, in fact demonstrate the limits and possibilities of law, of what may be done with constitutional provisions pertaining to social justice. As always, he retained in the foreground the real, historical struggles that surrounded the demand for reservation even as he marked their limitations. Reflecting on the judiciary's role with respect to the reservation for Backward Classes in Andhra Pradesh, he noted that the vagaries of judicial opinion ought not to govern anti-discriminatory and welfare legislation often won through people's struggles. As with much else, political practice, the concrete choices exercised by real human beings in actual historical contexts, interested him.

Yet, as India slid into the neoliberal years, the era of special economic

zones and accelerated development, Balagopal was not overly sanguine about the meaning of democratic practice, especially about what it could achieve. Without giving up on the democratic imperative, he turned to what may be justly called existential concerns: he would reflect on the dispositions of the self that engages in politics, on what makes it endure, inflict or resist acts of injustice and violence; on the anxieties and desires that underwrite its choices. While he had come to these concerns in the mid-1990s, they appeared urgent in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

What Does the Indian Ruling Class Do when it Rules?

The logical consequence of rethinking class and state was that one also rethought the nature of what an earlier generation of marxists effortlessly called the 'social totality'. For Balagopal, this totality had to be actually produced through active theoretical labour, through a consideration of historical, political and cultural legacies on the one hand, and economic growth, formal democratic practices and state policy on the other. In his own sustained analysis of totality, Balagopal paid attention to two things in particular: history and the state. Unlike many thinkers on the left, he refused to view history in terms of a logic that followed only the movement of capital. To him, the burden of India's specific history—much of which was not tied to capital and capitalists—was equally important. In his consideration of this history as it impinged on the present, Balagopal addressed two important features: the Indian state and democratic practice. The one led him to examine closely the ties that bound state and class actors, while the other pushed him to examine the possibilities of such practice in a polity that was underwritten by the logic of caste.

Balagopal viewed the Indian state as an effective context for the Indian ruling classes to exercise their political imagination. This imagination, he argued, was not capable of nation-building in the concrete, substantial sense of the term. Yet it was bound to that imperative by India's Constitution and the democratic compact Indians had forged among themselves. To adroitly manage this contradiction, the ruling classes had to work at and create a democratic consensus—and this, to Balagopal, was a fundamentally fraught enterprise. It required these classes to be imaginative and even visionary, but often the petty material interests that governed their existence came in the way of their either realising the vision or even managing a workable hegemony; whereas the resisting classes were creative, inventive and given to startling expressions of cultural persuasion and communication. The best the ruling classes could do was to articulate a pragmatic and often ferocious populism, which allowed them to be democratic in a formal political sense, while retaining an anti-democratic core.

In historical terms this populism had many lives. In post-independence India, a class compact had been forged through state initiative between the capitalists, the ruling party that commanded state power and the rural or provincial landowning classes. This class compact, Balagopal observed, held until the late 1960s, when it suffered a fracture. Partly due to the retreat of nationalist populism, or rather of its persuasive power, and partly due to the impact of two decades of agrarian change heralded by state policy and capital, a class of landowning farmers comprising various upper sudra castes came into existence. By the 1970s, this class was not content with marking its presence in and through nation-building processes alone and actually wanted to rule, but it soon realised that in order to do so, a remaking of the original class compact and a realignment of its constituent elements was necessary. This gave birth to a rather ferocious populism, and one that sought to inherit, usurp and remake the older nationalist consensus. At once condescending, sentimental and vicious, this populism, according to Balagopal, has remained the mainstay of Indian democracy. His brilliant analysis of the N.T. Rama Rao phenomenon demonstrates just how and why populism works.

In Andhra Pradesh, nationalist populism was replaced by a different political ideology—the one practised by N.T. Rama Rao and his Telugu Desam Party (TDP). To the extent that the latter won the elections and came to power, it fulfilled a historic mandate. The TDP demanded and acquired political visibility for a class that had come into its own in the third decade after independence, and besides overturned a politically compromised, corrupt and tyrannical Congress party. Balagopal went on to show the limits of this achievement—set by Rama Rao's unique and outlandish political style and the class–caste interests that the TDP came to represent. As he pointed out, in several contexts, Rama Rao's regime saw not only a very large number of encounter deaths but also violence against and murder of dalits.

Balagopal pointed out that Rama Rao's political success—and notoriety—have to be seen in the context of the nationwide self-assertion of landholding farmers. This assertion was theorised in several ways by participants that were guided by it and by sympathetic political observers—as an instance of regionalism; as the coming into visibility of 'rural' Bharat that had for a long time smarted in the shadows of 'urban' India; as the emergence of a class of anti-feudal peasants, who would eventually become

capitalist farmers and create the conditions for their own liquidation and the victory of socialism; as an effect of the Green Revolution which, it was argued, had capitalised production relationships in the Indian countryside. It seemed to Balagopal that each of these descriptions captured one or the other aspect of an important political and historical phenomenon, but not what he referred to as the entire ensemble of social relationships in rural India. The latter may not be grasped through categories drawn from textbook marxism: there might not be much point, he noted, in looking for either kulaks or the rural bourgeoisie in Indian villages. Nor would it help to parcel out social relationships as semi-feudal or capitalist.

The unique feature of the Indian rural class order was that it was compulsively linked to pre-modern hierarchies, in the form of the caste system, as well as to the institutions of the modern Indian state. Even as landholders reaped the advantages of modern technological changes and state subsidies for agricultural growth, and invested their surplus in lucrative town-based businesses, they required their farm workers to offer vetti or caste service labour. This was over and above what was exploited for gain, and existed as a valuable index of the landlord's authority. Vetti could be enforced through social coercion, or demanded from a chronically indebted—and largely 'untouchable'—rural working population. The authority displayed by this class towards its labourers was both an instance of caste power and an acute expression of class consciousness. This consciousness, argued Balagopal, was most evident in those distasteful and violent claims to privilege and power which were visible in the massacre of dalits in Karamchedu (1985) and the anti-reservation movement in Andhra Pradesh (1989). Unsurprisingly, both these events happened during Rama Rao's tenure as chief minister.

The details of the historical record notwithstanding, populism seemed to Balagopal to keep alive the fiction of democracy and even pass off as radical politics. Untroubled by the events that transpired in Rama Rao's Andhra Pradesh, the Indian parliamentary left saw in him an alternative to the Congress, and even discerned a genuine democratic aspirant in the man. Balagopal continued his critique of populism in his writings on Chandrababu Naidu and his tenure as chief minister, raising in the process questions of intent and agency. Are populist leaders, he wondered, apposite to the times, and in that sense do we see them as creatures of chance, or do we credit them with moral and political sense, of whatever kind? Is Chandrababu Naidu the man of the neoliberal hour, one whose manipulative and dissembling politics serves the needs of the ruling class best, while ensuring his own political dominance or is he a shifty, feckless political leader, to whom all roads lead to power? Balagopal's appraisal of Naidu leaves one in no doubt as to what sort of a leader Naidu was.

The tone of this appraisal was as important as what it sought to convey, and it is in such instances that we see Balagopal at his ironic and theoretical best. Importantly, his theoretical acuity is evident not only in his critical placing of Naidu in the context of rural society, but also in the wry manner he adopts while doing so. For one, he redeploys what were clearly defamatory criticisms levelled against Naidu by his political opponents, to devastating effect. He thus goes on to suggest that this man, considered no better than a shifty-eyed village bully about to make off with cattle not his own at a village fair, might well be that. However, he speculates that this is perhaps no mere personality trait, but an expression of a way of being, characteristic of the upper caste and lower middle class to which Naidu belongs. It is impossible to imagine a more acute description of the emotional and ethical core of political populism in the Indian context, and of its ultimate banality. Populism, Balagopal makes clear, is as much an expression of moral deficit as it is of ruling class political skullduggery. This is even more evident in his analysis of the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's ascent to power. Here, he locates the limits of ruling class imagination in the context of both geography and history. Rajasekhara Reddy thus appears as much a product of Rayalaseema's bloodstained past as its conflicted and violent present.

Balagopal's analysis of populism focused largely on the TDP, but essentially he was drawing attention to a more widespread phenomenon: the ways in which 'normal' everyday democracy had to be structurally and ideologically sustained by violence. Distilled through the protocols and conventions of democratic practice—that is, elections and electioneering—this violence seemed entirely in order to its purveyors. When, in Andhra, politicians in and out of power and local landed gentry demanded arms to guard themselves against class discontent and the naxalites, they argued their case in the legislature. Seeking democratic sanction for their right to carry arms, they defined their cause as just and right. Ironic as ever, Balagopal pointed out that such a naturalisation of violence was in keeping with the time-honoured tenets of 'kshatriya dharma', the right invested in certain castes to bear arms. Eventually, he noted, such a right was bound to transform the spaces of bourgeois democracy into sites of gang warfare. In his essay on Indira Gandhi, he pursued this argument at length and demonstrated how populism reached its violent limits in her last term as prime minister, as if it had exhausted all its claims.

Electoral democracy, it is clear from his analysis, both nurtures as well as polices populism. It renders it receptive to public anxieties and rage over

injustice and lack of access to common resources; at the same time, it marshals its responses carefully to allow only such change as may be consonant with the interests of the ruling classes.

Balagopal's understanding of the caste system, as one that in principle denied civil status to a segment of people, carried over into his analysis of everyday democracy and populism. His earliest understanding of caste saw him define it as a production relationship that defined access to resources. Later on, he came to see it as constituting class blocs comprising the resourceful and the resourceless, especially in rural agrarian society. Subsequently, and in the wake of the widespread refusal by upper castes, intellectuals and plebeians to acknowledge the vicious and debilitating effects of caste inequity, he viewed trespasses committed in the name of caste as crimes against democracy. He was particularly watchful of the manner in which these crimes were justified—his analysis of the Chundur massacres, for instance—and pointed to the inextricable play of caste and gender identities in such justifications. He argued, too, that patriarchy in the Indian context was inseparable from caste, and that together they rendered Indian society quite exceptionable, especially in its unique capacity to demean, humiliate and oppress those it considered inferior. Harnessing the power of caste scorn and hatred to political authority was one of the salient features of Indian populism, he pointed out, as he examined the manner in which justice and equity issues were consistently trivialised by anti-Mandal activists.

Importantly, in Balagopal's analytical world, none of these ways of understanding caste actually went away. He continued to work with all these ways of thinking about caste. In addition, his critique of caste and his studied opposition to it were defined in democratic terms. He pointed out that Dr Ambedkar opposed the impunity of the caste order not only because he had endured it himself, but also because he was a democrat. Populist expressions of democracy had to be countered with substantive efforts—and here, fighting caste-based inequity counted as much as challenging entrenched class–caste interests.

Inheriting a Legacy

The questions raised by Balagopal in the conjuncture of the 1980s and thereafter are clearly still relevant to our own times: the provincial propertied classes have been challenged politically by castes and classes lower in the social order, but has this challenge consolidated itself beyond the limits set by populist politics? In other words, is there a new political imagination at work, and one that does not lazily surrender itself to the comforts of electoral alliances and mechanically linked caste blocs? The Indian state is no longer a self-confessed welfare state and the Indian ruling classes have long since given up the struggle to forge a consensus. They are content to rule by ruse, drawing to themselves all those aspirants to a better life from diverse caste contexts, and by force, reserving the choicest violence for those who refuse to be thus charmed by the returns promised by state power, capital and political authority. The Indian left has learnt some lessons since the 1980s, but whether that has yielded a critical and enabling theory of social totality, and a practice commensurate with and pushing the limits to that theory, are matters that are open to question.

Most important, the complex and restive relationship that obtains between democratic practice, armed struggle and state violence is as troublesome today as it was two decades ago, and as central to the survival of India as a democratic nation—the fate of socialism, among other things, depends on how this survival happens, and Balagopal's resolute refusal of teleological reasoning should stand us in good stead.

I

Caste, Class and Populism

Agrarian Politics by Other Means

EPW, 17 July 1984

They have tried a variety of means, and most of them concurrently. They got themselves elected to the assemblies, to fabricate suitably porous land reform legislation, and thereby got rid of some acres of barren land; simultaneously, some others surrendered to Sarvodaya leaders with their anti-bureaucratic Bhoodan rhetoric[1] and got rid of some more acres of barren land; others sold their acres of land to their government to house the temples of India's development. With this, and with irrigation and fertilisers, they ran out of barren acres and so stopped talking about land reforms. The most remarkable change in the recent platform rhetoric of our politicians is the marked absence of the land reforms theme. Nobody exemplifies this shift of the centre of gravity of Indian populism away from the land question better than N.T. Rama Rao (NTR). The manifesto of his Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is a remarkably populist document, written in

[1] The Bhoodan or the land-as-gift movement was started by Gandhian Vinoba (Vinayak Narahari) Bhave (1895–1982). Inspired by a tour of Telangana districts in 1951, Bhave invoked the gandhian notion of trusteeship and asked landowners to feel compassion for the plight of the landless and donate one-sixth of their land. Since 300 million acres were under cultivation in India then, Bhave reckoned 50 million acres could be generated and distributed among the landless by nonviolent means. Unlike serious land reform, this scheme had the government's support and yet was a failure, with barren and disputed land being transferred; in Bihar deeds were made by landlords in the name of dogs and cows.

the most uninhibitedly sonorous prose; it promises many things to many people—mostly abstract things like honour to women and civilisation to the tribals—but the one thing it does not promise anybody is land. This, incidentally, should confound those who believe that NTR represents the 'capitalist' kammas against the 'feudal' reddys and brahmins. The fact of the matter is that over the years, land reform has ceased to be a necessary element of the ideology of the ruling classes, and has indeed turned into its opposite; a sufficient amount of horizontal redistribution at the upper levels has taken place, and all those whom the system could co-opt have been co-opted, which is why any further talk of land reforms has distinctly seditious possibilities.

It is not as if they were unaware of, or unprepared for, these possibilities earlier. They were quite aware and suitably prepared for them. The landlords of our country have always believed in Metternich's notorious formulation that 'war is a continuation of politics by other means'; and, as Lenin added, the other means are violent ones. Thus, while agrarian politics was sometimes debated in the assemblies, at other times, it was conducted through the use of guns (both public and private) and more traditional weapons in the countryside. After all, one of the first things that Nehru's newly independent army did was to put down the peasants of Telangana and bring the harried landlords back to the villages.[2]

But there is one change that has slowly crystallised over the years, simultaneously with the demise of the land reforms rhetoric and the rise of issues like remunerative prices and subsidised inputs. This is a certain objective homogenisation of the rural rich, a sort of vulgar change that is symbolised by the rise of the 'rich peasant'. In reality, the agrarian rich are subjectively quite a heterogeneous lot. Some of them are absentee landlords who maintain houses and vocations in towns, and visit villages only at harvest time, if at all; a majority of them constitute a mix of absentee and resident landlords, who have businesses and professional vocations in town but leave one member of the family or a faithful retainer in the village to look after the farming without actually setting hand to plough. Only a few of them belong to the category of people characterised as hard-working

[2] The Telangana movement in the first phase (1946–51) was a peasant movement under the leadership of the Communist Party of India against feudal landlords and the princely state of the Nizam of Hyderabad. After India gained political independence from the British and the Indian National Congress wrested power, the Jawaharlal Nehru-led government sent in the Indian army in September 1948 to quell the Nizam's resistance to join the Indian Union and to rein in the Razakar-led terror. In the process, the army also dealt a blow to the Telangana peasant struggles.

rich peasant entrepreneurial types. The actual cultivation is done either by tenants or sharecroppers or annual farm labourers or daily wage labourers—usually a mixture of all these. They are exploited extra-economically through caste and debt bondage and through the exercise of traditional social domination. The surplus that they generate is not necessarily nor usually invested in the village, but much of it goes into the towns (a significant but prudently ignored aspect of the 'exploitation of villages by towns'), while the required investment itself comes through state-financed development projects. This developmental infrastructure has vested various sources of power and patronage in the hands of the landlords, not to mention finance procured from not only rural banks and credit societies but also gram panchayats and zilla parishads. This power and patronage meshes neatly with traditional feudal authority over social life. As is well recognised, one of the distinctive characteristics of Indian feudalism was that the state was not only a protector of exploitation but also a principal means of extracting the surplus. This is exactly the role that the 'modernising state' is playing in rural India.

All in all, this class of rural rich signifies the dominant pole of the peculiar semi-feudal relations spawned by imperialist capital impinging on traditional social relations, intent on commoditising the product without revolutionising the production relations. It is natural that such an unnatural class should be subjectively very heterogeneous, but objectively, there is one thing that has over the years come to hold it together, and that is its price and cost consciousness. It regards effort as a cost and the product as a commodity, both of which are used conjointly to pump out a surplus. Across the land, this is one class that is rapidly becoming a class-for-itself; and its footprints are being seen everywhere as it becomes conscious of its position and strength. And the more conscious it becomes, the more it gathers behind it the genuine rich and middle peasants, thereby forming a formidable army. Thanks to it, urban eyes are now turned towards the countryside. However, what the urban eye sees is not reality, but an 'ideology', in the pristine marxist sense of the term. It sees the harassed and exploited 'village' confronting the exploiting 'town'. What it does not see is that behind the smokescreen of verbiage created by the Sharad Joshis,[3] it is their very constituents—the agrarian rich—who are carting the wealth

[3] Sharad Joshi is the founder-leader of Shetkari Sangathana, a farmers' organisation founded in the late 1970s that propounded the theory of Bharat versus India representing the rural–urban divide. Joshi is the author of *Bharat Speaks Out* (1982) and *Bharat's Eye View* (1986).

of the villages to the towns, to be invested in quite un-rural and un-Bharatiya activities like road contracts, liquor shops, and funding of a son-in-law employed by the satanic government of India (GOI). What it also does not see is that these 'farmers' have two faces, one a democratic face that holds up traffic demonstrating *en masse* for securing remunerative prices or for the Agricultural Costs Commission, and the other, the ugly face of 'atrocities on harijans'[4] as our caste-struck press calls them. A reality that has not yet percolated into the consciousness of observers is that the 'farmers' who rode their tractors behind Sharad Joshi into Chandigarh merely signify the other face of the Bhoomi Sena[5] landlords of Bihar. They are part of the same class-for-itself that is taking shape across the land, and the very obvious differences between them are merely an aspect of the subjective heterogeneity of this class-to-be which has much more rapidly become a class-for-itself than a class-in-itself. The truth of this will come out the day Sharad Joshi, who appears to be busy in Punjab these days, catches the Kalka Mail at Chandigarh and buys a ticket to Patna.

The consequence of this for genuine peasant struggle (which can today only mean a poor peasant struggle) is that the enemy it faces is much more formidable than the old type of feudal lords. It is formidable not only because it is numerically larger, organisationally better equipped, and organically placed at the heart rather than the periphery of the Indian economy, but also because it is a *populist* class, a class that can pretend (and is very successfully pretending) to be a democratic class, which ensures that the various political parties and public opinion can take its side with much more passion and much less inhibition than in the case of the old-type feudals. The Indian agrarian revolution thus promises to be a very bloody one.

* * *

The budget session of the Andhra Pradesh assembly this year was less a budget session than a naxalite session. The principal topic of discussion was naxalites, and the concern—for a change—cut across the political

[4] We have retained Balagopal's usage of the gandhian term of condescension, *harijan*, in vogue in the 1980s. This also helps us track how, over the decades, the term dalit came into popular use.

[5] Bhoomi Sena is a private army formed by members of the kurmi caste in Bihar. It was responsible for several massacres of dalits in the 1970s and 1980s including the Pipra massacre in which fourteen dalits (chamar by caste) were killed on the intervening night of 25–26 February 1980.

spectrum, embracing the Congress(I) and the communists, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM). The government, again for a change, sympathised entirely with the opposition, though the natural contradictions between the compulsions of being in power and those of being in opposition led to quite bizarre and humorous paradoxes. For instance, one day the agitated opposition wanted to discuss the matter of the gond tribals, who are alleged to have been incited by the naxalites to the point of flying a foreign flag in an obscure village of Adilabad district; it did not occur to any of these people's representatives that for the gonds, Hyderabad is foreign land and the tricolour a foreign flag. But to their chagrin, the chief minister [N.T. Rama Rao], in a dramatic throwback to his celluloid days, took off on the melodramatic theme of 'innocent tribals exploited by outsiders', and gave an oration that thrilled even the jaded press; in this piece of histrionics, he was no doubt aided by his total ignorance of the matter, for the only tribal he knows is the film-studio version, the paradigmatic primitive dressed in beads and bird-feathers. Thus, robbed of what should have been *their* rhetoric, the confused opposition reacted with pique.

A CPI legislator complained that while the opposition wanted to discuss the 'naxalite menace', the chief minister was quite unwarrantedly dragging the tribals' problems into the discussion; and a Congress(I) legislator from Adilabad, pushed into a sensitive spot by the reference to exploitation of the tribals by the non-tribal outsiders, wanted to know 'whether only we are exploiting the tribals—how about the tribal corporations set up by the government?' In their resentment at NTR's unseemly melodrama, the communist forgot that he was supposed to be a communist, and the Congressmen forgot that it was their government that had set up the tribal corporations! But the positive outcome of the situation is that together all of them inadvertently let many cats out of the bag.

But the discussion was not confined only to the gonds. If the naxalites had been confined to obscure tribals in remote forests, that would not have worried the legislators very much. What instead worries them is that the naxalites have become a force in the plains, particularly the plains of the Karimnagar and Warangal districts. And the agricultural labourers are becoming increasingly responsive to their politics, violence and all. That was the reason for the furore, which included a demand for stringent police action to ruthlessly wipe out the naxalites, for distribution of arms to 'responsible persons' in the villages, and for an in-camera sitting of the assembly and council to thrash out the strategy and tactics of dealing with the 'naxalite menace'. Only the talk of a national government was missing

to give it a warlike or civil war-like complexion. It does not seem to have struck anyone as rather humorous that those who profess that the talk of violence is unconstitutional, un-gandhian and even un-marxian, should actually plead for the distribution of arms sitting *inside* the assembly, the living flesh of the Constitution. But what did strike many as rather more than cynical is the virtuous pose of nonviolence adopted by the most unlikely people. There is not a single political party in our country which does not employ violence for sectional ends. The BJP and MIM, in their electoral violence that is converted into communal violence in Hyderabad, were responsible for more than ninety killings during the last one year; the Congress(I) and the CPI(M), in their running warfare in Warangal, killed a total of about fifty followers and cadres belonging to each other's parties during the term of the previous Assembly. And it is these 'paragons of non-violence' who want arms to fight the naxalites, whose tally is nowhere near the numbers of the politicians!

Anyway, the government has been quite alive to its responsibilities, even without prodding from the opposition. Starting last July, it has gone on a spree setting up armed police camps staffed by the AP Special Police (APSP) constables in the villages of the districts of Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Adilabad and Khammam. These camps have now become part of the topography of north Telangana; there were about 80 of them last September, which increased to 100 in January, while at present, the number has gone beyond 120. About twenty new camps came up in the tribal belt of Adilabad alone during the month of April. And, it must be added that the existence of armed police camps in 120 villages effectively implies a continuous watch on five times that many villages. Finding the APSP constables to be either insufficient or inefficient, the state government declared that it would borrow two battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) from the centre. One battalion or part of it came from Orissa and was quickly deployed in the police camps of Warangal district, and in some Karimnagar villages. Within one month of the deployment (on 10 January), the CRPF constables beat to death a lambada peasant, Amru, at Borlagudem in the Mahadevpur forest of Karimnagar. Either because of this premature exhibition of their superior efficiency or because of some internecine disagreements within the khaki establishment, the CRPF men are now back in the barracks and the APSP has taken over. Not to be outdone in efficiency, they too beat to death (on 12 April) a peasant, a harijan named Pothaiah, at Gidda in Nizamabad district.

The arms that the opposition has demanded are in addition to the deployment of these armed paramilitary men, and in addition to the presence of ever-willing policemen at the regular police stations. The landlords are apparently not satisfied with the violent assaults perpetrated by these police forces on the rural poor. The fact that they are not satisfied was apparent well before the demand for arms, as the landlords of Telangana have been actively organising themselves to fight the naxalites. They did not wait for legislative sanction before arming themselves; rather, the legislators' demand would only provide a legal cover for their murderous activities. But what is curious is that unlike their counterparts in Bihar, they did not have to form Bhoomi Senas and such goon-like squads. They have instead a national party, and that too a party with a 'mean' image ('the only party a decent man can belong to', in Ram Jethmalani's own words), the BJP. It has surprised many that the BJP, which has never had much of a following in Telangana, should attract the attention of the landlords in search of a party with which to fight the naxalites; but there is a reason behind the mystery. The Congress(I) and Telugu Desam have charismatic leaders but neither an organisation nor an ideology—exactly the two things required to wage class warfare, while a charismatic leader is enough for getting votes. The BJP, on the other hand, has both. It has an organisation in the form of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). It also has the right ideology for winning over the middle sections in terms of the Hindu dharma, subtly (and quite illogically) metamorphosed as patriotism, which is the last refuge of the propertied classes. This is because it symbolises the false consciousness of the petty bourgeoisie, a class which owns so little property that it imagines the whole country to be its fiefdom and falls in love with it. (It is, as an aside, a good study in the dominance of economic interest over even pride, that the angry young men of the sudra landlord families—mostly reddys and velamas—have been willing to swallow the indignities of Hindu dharma and proclaim it as their ideology, if only it would help to convince the middle classes that the rebellious labourers are anti-national rabble intent on dismembering and destroying the motherland.)

Thus equipped, the landlords are waging their war. The RSS weekly, *Jagrti,* regularly carries on the frontpage lies and slanders (apparently planted by the police because they tally with police FIRs) about the naxalite movement. They slander any individual who refuses to cooperate with them in the anti-naxalite tirade, even if he is not particularly friendly with the naxalites. He is hounded until he joins the chorus. Anyone alleged to be killed by the naxalites—even if he was only a goonda—is posthumously canonised into a martyr in the cause of Bharat Mata, and the BJP, in the company of Congress and Telugu Desam, celebrates his annual *shraaddha*

(ritual ceremony for the dead) with a public meeting that ends in much raving and ranting against the naxalites. The worst part of this exercise is that they pick on any policeman who is either not sufficiently cruel to the rural poor and the naxalites, or insists on even-handedly booking cases against the landlords too; they pick on him and spread the calumny that he is a naxalite front man in the police, an accusation that is calculated to send him scampering in search of his lathi and his revolver to set his record straight. Last December, the ABVP even held a rally at Hyderabad and submitted to the chief minister (among other things) a list of police stations whose inspectors were not cruel enough or partial enough to satisfy them. One of the reasons for the decision of the state governments to borrow the CRPF battalions was the persistent clamour, both by the BJP and the other representatives of the landlords, that lower level constables are friendly with the naxalites and therefore it is necessary to bring in non–Telugu speaking policemen (who would not be able to communicate with the local people).

They have not stopped at slander and propaganda. Landlords and their sons in the guise of the BJP or ABVP go around in jeeps with guns and other weapons and attack naxalite cadres. They thrash them on the street, throw them into the jeep, and hand them over to the police, who repeat the treatment once again and book them in some false case. In colleges, ABVP cadres move around with revolvers and knives, and attack pro-naxalite students and youth, fully confident that they are immune against police cases. A circle inspector of police at Warangal frankly confessed to the father of a pro-naxalite student who was attacked and injured by ABVP boys, 'We cannot help you until your son changes his politics.' Many such students have had to quit college in fear of these murderous attacks.

In this process, the 'patriots' have committed quite a few murders. They murdered three peasants and a student in Karimnagar and a student in Nalgonda. The number of peasants and students whom they have thrashed or stabbed to death is much larger. Scouring the streets in jeeps or in gangs, armed to the teeth, and backed by the police, they threaten to become quite a menace. There was even a controversial case of a girl student of Karimnagar district who was kidnapped and molested; the police blame it on the ABVP, and ABVP on the police (adding, as is their wont, that the police officer who blamed them is a naxalite front man). In reality, it was the outcome of a collusion between both of them.

All this, of course, eludes mention in the press and discussion in the Assembly. However, when the naxalites retaliated and killed two of the most notorious of these landlord-patriots-turned-goondas, the entire state sat up and decried the murder of an advocate (as one of the victims also happened to be an advocate). BJP advocates made tearful speeches in their Bar Associations and got the courts boycotted in town after town. And that was also when all the people's representatives in the Assembly started demanding the distribution of arms to 'responsible persons' in the villages, to defend the 'people' against the naxalites.

The chorus goes on and on, and will no doubt pick up in tone and strength as the landlords get organised on other fronts too. It is not without significance that one of the two BJP men killed by the naxalites was also a 'peasant' leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh. Not just the BJP, but all the parliamentary parties are trying to overcome their ingrained habit of regarding mass action as merely the formal inaugural prelude to electioneering, and to lead morchas and 'rasta roko programmes', and so on. The issues that they are focusing on are quite typical of the agrarian causes championed by the landlords (though they concern a much wider section of the rural population)—the steady supply of power to villages, quick completion of irrigation projects, remunerative prices for cash crops, etc.—though till now their attempts to stage mass demonstrations have been flops. While they have just lost the habit of mass agitation, that will not remain so forever, and as the rich agrarian classes strengthen their leadership on this front, they will no doubt become much more violent on the anti-labour front. As it is, a typical press report of the meetings of the BJP or Telugu Desam or Congress(I) leaders begins with an attack on the state (or central) government for neglecting the 'farmer', accompanied by specific demands regarding pricing and power supply, and ends with an appeal to ruthlessly crush the 'naxalite menace'. This theme is likely to dominate the scenario over the next few years.

A False Resurrection

The Rise and Fall of Rama Rao

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The trunk route from Madras to Calcutta passes through the four rich coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh—East and West Godavari, Guntur and Krishna. The scenery along the route is enchanting to the eyes, for it is green without end, not wildly green as it becomes further up in north coastal Orissa and Bengal, but green in an orderly and disciplined way, as if nature here is calculating the marginal cost of being that much more lush; it is green in a commercial way.

On either side of the route are villages laid end upon end, many of them being really small towns; with neatly thatched and tiled houses, and quite a few good buildings, they do not seem to be part of this 'land of the wretched'; but the pride of place is taken by the twin symbols of coastal Andhra Pradesh: cinema halls that look like rice mills and rice mills that look like cinema halls, give or take a chimney stack. The resemblance would, no doubt, offend any decent architect, but it is true to its salt, for all the surplus that is generated by the delta agriculture goes in exactly two directions: agro-based industry and trade, on the one hand, and film production, distribution and exhibition, on the other.

This wealth resides in a class, a class that is predominantly (but by no means exclusively) kamma by caste and agrarian in its origins, which came of age during the period of the nationalist movement and the agrarian struggles against the zamindars and the British Raj. These struggles that

accompanied its birth have also given it the largest share of participation in radical movements; socialism, rationalism, atheism, communism, and radical humanism[1]—you name the heterodoxy and they have seen it. Over the given period, the people of this class have also grown substantially rich, and have multiplied their riches since the Green Revolution. But while wealth has come their way, they have been systematically kept out of the prime seats of power at Hyderabad. They lost it symbolically when they had to concede the name Visalandhra (in favour of the Hindi-ised Andhra Pradesh[2]) for the state for which they fought the hardest, and had to simultaneously concede their demand for making Vijayawada the capital city: and they lost it substantially as part of the general 'Congress culture' of keeping the economically dominant classes and communities in the states away from the seats of political power.

The rise of NTR[3] and his Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is generally seen as the long overdue assertion of this class (usually further vulgarised as the rise of the kamma caste). It is true that NTR and his most vociferous followers belong to this class, including both the main body of its members living in the coastal districts or the expatriates settled along the irrigation canals and around perennial tanks in Telangana and Rayalaseema; it is also true that a majority of his most ardent voters belong to these four districts; it is further true that the one man who almost single-handedly led his campaign—Ramoji Rao,[4] editor of the largest circulated Telugu daily *Eenadu*, which functioned as a pamphlet for NTR both at the time of his election and during the recent crisis[5]—typifies the pushing commercial

[1] A philosophy propounded by the Bengali revolutionary Manabendra Nath Roy (1887–1954). In 1917, Roy founded the first communist party outside the Soviet Union, and disagreed at the Second Communist International in 1920 with Lenin on the National and Colonial Question. He later espoused the philosophy of radical humanism.

[2] As a linguistic state, Andhra Pradesh was formed on 1 November 1956.

[3] N.T. Rama Rao (1923–96), a popular Telugu film actor-turned-politician, formed the TDP in 1982 on the plank of 'Telugu pride', opposing the Congress party's 'culture of imposing chief ministers from Delhi' where ever the Congress was in power. The TDP was voted to power in a record nine months after its establishment on 29 March 1982. NTR became chief minister with the TDP winning 203 of the 294 assembly seats.

[4] Media baron and founder of the *Eenadu* group, which today runs television channels in more than ten provincial languages in India.

[5] The reference is to the removal of the NTR-led ministry on 15 August 1984, independence day, when Rama Rao was actually in the US for an open-heart surgery. The Congress government at the Centre goaded a dissident TDP minister, Nadendla Bhaskara Rao, to form the government; in this, he was abetted by the then state governor, Thakur Ram Lal. In response, NTR undertook a dramatic *rath yatra* in his 'Chaitanya Ratham' and stirred public opinion against the Congress/centre's attitude. Thirty-one days into Bhaskar Rao's chief ministership, Indira Gandhi, who was prime minister, replaced governor Ram Lal

enterprise of this class; but to stop there would be to read the story by halves.

It is generally recognised that the thirty-odd years of development of India have given rise to unforeseen stresses in the lower rungs of society; what is equally true is that they have given rise to equally unforeseen stresses in the upper layers too. The monopoly capitalist class is numerically very small, and is forced to contend with a large mass of the rich and not very rich sections of the propertied classes (both urban and rural), which are pushing upwards, demanding a variety of concessions and considerations that the capitalist class is unprepared to give. These classes find the arrangement structured since 1947 inadequate for their aspirations, and want a new deal, which would allow them greater leeway. Whether it is in politics, planning or finance, they are no longer willing to accept what was unilaterally thrust on them as the 'national consensus' in the 1950s, taking advantage of both their innocence and the patriotic and socialist premium that conformity then carried with it. This is at the root of the serious tensions that are besetting all the ruling class parties, including the birth of upstarts like the TDP, which keep sprouting now and then. Most such tensions have their own individual origins and characteristics, but the sociological origin of a phenomenon does not exhaust its meaning and significance. The break occurs, and the phenomenon takes birth at the point of maximum abrasion, but once it is born, it attracts a wider constituency that was undirected, undecided or amorphous till then. Some reach out to it because of the logic of its existence, and others do so because of the mere fact of its existence. Part of the constituency, indeed, is created by the existence of this force that it can look to, just as the consequent extension of the constituency acts upon the phenomenon and changes its character appropriately. The propertied classes of delta Andhra spawned and promoted NTR, but once in being (and more so in power), they had to share him with others whose aspirations found a real or imaginary point of intersection with theirs. And these others included not only many of the propertied classes of the other parts of the state who were dissatisfied with the existing arrangement of the economy and polity, but also the common people who were utterly disgusted with the vulgar depravity of the Congress(I) leaders of the state and whose disgust, which remained unfocused for a long time, at last found a point that it could collectively gravitate to, in this one man whom they all knew so well that it seemed as if he lived in everybody's neighbourhood.

with Shankar Dayal Sharma and NTR wrested back his chief ministership. After Indira Gandhi's assassination in October 1984, even when the Congress won a record 404 seats in the Lok Sabha elections in December that year, the TDP bucked the national trend and managed to win thirty out of forty-two seats in AP.

To describe this combination of forces and aspirations and illusions as 'regionalism' is one of the inanities of two-penny journalism. There is perhaps no other oft-repeated frivolity than the profound remark that 'regionalism is a rising force in Indian politics'. In reality, it is a rising obfuscation of Indian politics (which, of course, does not make it any less serious). It is resorted to by hack columnists because its status as a popular banality renders serious analysis unnecessary; and as an ideology, by a variety of political and economic forces, for two reasons: one, since the monopoly capitalist class claims no region of the country for itself and is claimed by none, identification with the aspirations of a region becomes a convenient counter-point in challenging it, and, two, of all the paradigms of protest, it is regionalism that has the greatest legitimacy in the eyes of the ruling class; it does not carry the stigma that, say, communalism or casteism carry; that much has remained as a residue from the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s for linguistic states. Thus, it happens that communal, casteist and plainly economic forces describe themselves in the 'regionalist' idiom, in terms of linguistic aspirations, devolution of power to the states, autonomy of the regions, etc, the journalist picks up the idiom, the ideologue adorns it with statistics, and the metropolitan intellectual builds his analysis around it, because regionalism scares him so much that he would much rather presume the worst than take the risk of being surprised by it. The upshot of all this is that from being merely acceptable, regionalism even becomes something of a fashion.

We, therefore, have NTR proclaiming to the world that 'injury [has been] done to the Telugu pride', and everybody taking it for granted that such injury has indeed been done, and NTR representing the revival of Telugu nationalism against it. So much has been written about this revival that one is forced to stop and look around for it, but in vain. Telugu nationalism has had a rather long innings, from the first decade of the twentieth century till the end of the 1950s, its dying embers were stoked by the agitation of the late 1960s for a steel plant at Visakhapatnam,[6] but by the end of the 1960s, it had died a natural death and there has been no reason for a revival since then; no more injury has, therefore, been done to Telugus *qua* Telugus than to any other of the principal linguistic groups of India.

[6] The agitational cry for a steel plant in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam, the second largest city in the state, was *'Visaka Ukku Andhrula Hakku'* ('A steel plant in Visakhapatnam is the right of Andhraites').

Thus, it happens that NTR came to power at the helm of a variety of interests, some narrowly economic, some democratic, but none 'regional' in any but a purely formal geographic sense, though shrouded in the fashionable ideology of 'regionalism'. No more was required of him than that he should ably serve these interests, and maintain the fashion. But there we need to reckon with the man and his idiosyncrasies. Trotsky is supposed to have said that history progresses through the natural selection of accidents. As E.H. Carr points out, Friedrich Engels expressed much the same idea in the language of the vector mechanics of his days. In the jargon of modern science, one would say that history finds its path by filtering out the deviant noise. But the process of filtering out of the noise is prolonged, usually painful, sometimes amusing, but always educative.

II

Populism was always the weakness of Hindu gods. Witness how freely they have their boons and how often that magnanimity got them into trouble. And NTR, having played those gods too often on the screen during his film career, had come to believe quite honestly that he *was* one of them. Add to this the fact that he is enormously rich (the minimal rumour is that he is worth Rs 50 crore, black money and white put together), which imbues him with a certain disdainful contempt for the petty rich and their petty graft, and the stage for populism is well set. This populism consists in fighting not so much the real enemies of the people as the most obvious and apparent enemies as perceived by the people—and these are the greedy clerk, the obstructive bureaucrat, the corrupt legislator, etc. It is worth describing a few of these bouts.

The first target of NTR's ire was the clerk, the state government's Non-Gazetted Officer (NGO), to be precise. He lowered the government employees' age of retirement from 58 to 55, and when the NGOs went on strike against the measure, he unleashed a campaign of slander and vilification against them that surprised everybody. He was the avatar come down to earth to give succour and comfort to the masses, and here were the greedy clerks obstructing his divine mission. He raved and ranted against them in public meetings and on well-designed posters stuck on walls all over the state, questioning rhetorically whether the government was to serve the six crore Andhraites or the six lakh NGOs. Then came the turn of the corrupt among the bureaucrats, the legislators, and the assorted go-betweens who make a living and much more in the shady corridors of the state secretariat. It is widely accepted that the organisation of corruption at these levels, which had been comprehensively systematised during

Congress rule (especially during the chief ministership of Chenna Reddy[7]), has received a hard blow at NTR's hands. But this statement must be read with care; it was not corruption that he vanquished, but the neat structure into which it had been organised during Congress rule. Corruption itself sprouted soon in a different corner, like the hyacinth weed that bedevils Hyderabad's Hussain Sagar.[8] Irrespective of his intentions, NTR has neither the imagination nor the mass base to really take on corruption. Meanwhile, however, he did manage to offend and alienate many of these operators, including his own legislators. What they could not understand or forgive was this sudden rectitude on the part of a man who had made his life's fortune in the most corrupt of all worlds, a rectitude that much resembled the phony renunciation of the last leg of the Hindu lifecycle, *sannyasashrama,* whose garb NTR symbolically sported.

As part of this drive against corruption, he initiated the much-promised and much-heard-about Lok Ayukta, and placed in that chair an official who was a former chief justice, former vicechancellor, and radical humanist intellectual who had affiliations with Amnesty International[9]; needless to say, he belongs to NTR's region, class and community. But while the public was given to believe, through populist rhetoric, that the Lok Ayukta would be everyman's painless answer to bureaucratic corruption and nepotism, the reality turned out to be much less pleasant. The Lok Ayukta and Upa-Lok Ayukta Act stipulates that only officials drawing a salary of Rs 1,150 or more per month fall within the jurisdiction of the Act. This automatically puts out of the ring the tahsil clerk, the village bureaucracy, and the rural police inspector; in other words, at one stroke, the Lok Ayukta was made inaccessible and useless to about 70 percent of the population. (When a complaint was made to the Lok Ayukta concerning torture in police lock-ups in Warangal district, it was returned with the comment that all the allegations are against head constables and sub-inspectors of police, who do not fall within the purview of the Act—as if the director general of police would come down to the lock-ups and torture people!) The Act also says that when a complaint is lodged against an official to the Lok Ayukta, a copy of the same should be sent to the superior authorities over the official—whereas in reality, it is essential that the complaint should be kept a secret at least until the preliminary enquiry is over, if harassment

[7] Marri Chenna Reddy (1919–96), hailing from a landed community in Telangana, was twice chief minister of AP from 1978 to 1980 and from 1989 to 1990 but never served the full term of five years.

[8] A large lake in Hyderabad city, located close to the seat of power, the state secretariat.

[9] The reference here is to Yarlagadda Ranganayakulu.

and victimisation are to be avoided. To top it off, there is the startling provision in the Act that if a complaint is found to be false, the plaintiff can be prosecuted.

Anyway, a moth-eaten Lok Ayukta is better than *none,* and the Telugu people got one. But NTR's flair for mythology and history was not satisfied with it. He resurrected Asoka's 2,300-year-old institution of Dhamma Mahamatra [spelt Dharma by NTR's government], and hung that mantle on yet another bureaucrat. But while the Mauryan original was expected to ensure compliance with dhamma *suo moto,* so to say, this modern bureaucratic version was hedged about with suitable rules and regulations, and indeed it was not clear to anyone (least of all to the incumbents themselves) where the Lok Ayukta called off, and where the Dharma Mahamatra began; anyway, once again, a moth-eaten Dharma Mahamatra is better than none, and the Telugu people got one. But this bi-millennial resurrection, in a reversal of Marx's famous dictum, turned out to be first a farce and then a tragedy. The farce began soon enough, with the bureaucrats of the state questioning as one man the incumbent's moral authority to sit as ombudsman, and the Lok Ayukta actually threatening to investigate the Dharma Mahamatra's land-grabbing activities; and it ended tragically when the usurper Nadendla Bhaskara Rao abolished the office unceremoniously and sent the dignitary packing. NTR, after his return, has prudently decided not to attempt a 'Third Coming'.

Soon after these forays against corruption, NTR set his sights wider. The previous Congress regime, as part of its quid pro quo culture, had granted permission for a large number of private engineering colleges ('donation colleges' as they are called in popular parlance), which collect capitation fees ranging from Rs 25,000 to Rs 1 lakh from each student. There had been a vociferous demand for these colleges from the propertied classes of coastal Andhra, who had all these years been sending their sons to far-off places in Karnataka to purchase their engineering education, thereby incurring an unpatriotic drain of Andhra wealth. In response to their demand, the Congress(I) government granted permission to thirteen colleges in one year, and up they sprouted, one each in Bapatla and Machilipatnam, two in Vijayawada, and so on, all along the coast; and the expatriates set up colleges in Warangal, Hyderabad and Cuddapah outside the coastal districts. Now, the people who demanded, established and profited both from the product and the enterprise of these 'donation colleges' are part of the core of NTR's class base, and they probably expected that he would not touch them. They did not reckon with the possibility that he would take his populism that far and actually threaten to take over the

colleges and ban the collection of capitation fees, in the name of fighting commercialisation of education, which is exactly what he tried to do. But he soon discovered that it is one thing to fight the clerks, and quite another thing to ban donations to engineering colleges, especially if the educational entrepreneurs manning them happen to be 'our own men'. He had to finally cave in halfway and allow them many concessions like the promise of substantial financial grants, and the right to charge annual fees of Rs 5,000 in lieu of capitation fees, before he could implement his ban. Another comparable populist exploit was the attempt to impose an additional levy on rice millers to obtain stocks for his scheme of supplying rice to the poor at Rs 2 a kg. The powerful lobby of rice millers immediately went on strike, and reopened their shutters only after he granted them the fondest dream of all rice millers of AP: the permission to export a large part of the non-levy rice to the neighbouring rice-hungry states like Tamil Nadu.

In another much-publicised measure, he also tried to impose restrictions on the price of food items sold in hotels and restaurants, to bring them within the reach of the 'common man'. The hoteliers, constituting another powerful lobby, also closed down their shops in protest, and could be persuaded to reopen only after exempting the 'starred' hotels from the regulations, and allowing the others to sell two kinds of food; one that they described as 'special', which was quality-wise the same as before, but now cost more; and the other that they contemptuously dubbed as 'Telugu Desam meals', which was of very poor quality, and cost the regulation price.

These and other comparable actions of NTR must have made his class base a bit uncomfortable; not that they had lost anything but they certainly did not find it very amusing to have their own leader charge at them in unguarded moments. The most common comment heard from well-to-do people during the first months of NTR's rule was: 'One never knows what this man will do.' Nevertheless, they probably realised that if NTR had to stay in Hyderabad for long, such tilting at windmills must be suffered; for whatever political analysts may say about his film-related glamour, in reality the people were not all that stupid.

But if these forays into bylanes were one thing, then NTR's fight with the Centre was another thing altogether. What matters is not how seriously he fought the Centre, but that his class, his constituency, did not like the *principle* of confrontation with the Centre. What they wanted was a reshuffle and a new deal of the cards between them and the monopoly capitalist class, not a holy battle against the centralisation of economic power. What they wanted was a bigger share of the national economic cake, and a suitable restructured model of the cake in the first place, not a

rhetorical walkout from the National Development Council (NDC). On this point, NTR was functioning at quite a different wavelength. It is not that the existing lopsided distribution of power between the Centre and the states hurt his democratic sentiments (for he has none). One cannot understand the spirit of his opposition to Delhi in such modern and rational terms. Rather, what impels him is the sense—or nonsense—of the burden of historical and mythological tradition that continuously haunts him. In fighting Delhi, he probably sees himself as avenging the defeat of the Kakatiyas[10] at the hands of the Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji,[11] during the last years of the thirteenth century, an event that signifies, in the prevalent mythology of Andhra history, the beginning of the enslavement of the Telugu people by Delhi and its Deccan agents. The mundane concerns of the other chief ministers who walked out along with him from the NDC do not mean much to him. That is the reason why he has gone the farthest in opposing the Centre among all the parties espousing the cause of federalism. To give him his due, his was the only electoral party that categorically condemned the army action in Punjab, not as a prudent afterthought as a consequence of the angry reaction of the Sikhs (the kind of electoral prudence that affected most of the opposition parties, ranging from the communists to the BJP), but on the very morrow of the army action.

It is here that he was out of tune with the section of the propertied classes of the state that perceived him as *their* man, the man *they* had brought to power. For them, this crusade was diversionary and a waste of time if it was only a verbal one, and if it was meant seriously, then it was definitely bad business. It was not *their* business, at any rate. And the one man who constantly harped on this point inside the TDP was Nadendla Bhaskara Rao.

Bhaskara Rao has been painted in the press as an unscrupulous man who has changed loyalties umpteen times in his ambition to become chief minister; he is an opportunist who split the TDP at the behest of the Congress(I) to further his own ends; he made brazen attempts to buy MLAs to join his camp; and he is a ruthless man who engineered a terrible communal situation in Hyderabad on 9 September [1984] to impose curfew on the city and somehow prevent NTR from coming back to power. He is certainly all this, but he is also the one man within the TDP who stood firm as a true representative of the interests of the classes that brought NTR to

[10] A historically significant regional dynasty that ruled most parts of what is now known as Andhra Pradesh from the town of Warangal during the period 1083–1323.

[11] Alauddin Khilji is considered the most powerful ruler of the Turko-Afghan dynasty. He ruled large parts of the subcontinent during the period 1296–1316.

power. In the manner of any egoistical *neta,* he personalised this symbolism, and claimed that it is 'I who brought NTR into the party and it is I who led him to victory'. And the one point on which he stood fast, and which he never tired of telling anyone who would care to listen, was that this crusade against the Centre is 'bad business for us'. After he formed the breakaway faction of the party, what he proclaimed as the one-point manifesto of his faction was 'no fight with the Centre'. He insists that it is this stand that represents the true interests of the Telugu people, and quite correctly, given what he means by 'the true interests of the Telugu people'. For more than a year, in vain, he tried to persuade NTR to see this point, and failing in that job, he took it upon himself to be history's agent that would filter out the deviant noise of federalist rhetoric. With kindly help from Indira Gandhi and her minions, he hoped to succeed, but history had one more trick up its sleeve.

There must be a lot of soul-searching going on within the Congress(I) as a post-mortem about who was primarily responsible for making a hash of the Andhra operation. Whatever the verdict, the fact stands that Ram Lal, then governor of AP, was the instrument through which the mismanagement took place. He appears to have thought that toppling a government is as brazenly done as smuggling a timber truck past a Himalayan checkpost. The consequence was a fierce public revulsion. By that time, in fact, many of the common people had lost much of their enthusiasm for NTR, and perhaps if the operation had been delayed by one year, NTR would have fallen under the weight of his own incongruity. This fact may surprise people living outside Andhra, who have been fed with the image of a prophet created for him by the kind of footloose democrat who goes around searching for a one-man alternative to Indira Gandhi; nevertheless it is true that 'incongruous' is the one word which strikes any observer as being an apt description of his manner and his politics, and his very apparel symbolises this. He sports the Shaivite *vibhuti* on his forehead, and wears yellow-coloured silk robes like a Buddhist monk at a prosperous monastery, and created a sensation in the gossip columns by sporting a single earring in one ear, and letting it be known that he wears a woman's sari as his nightdress. (The last two, apparently, are some kind of tantrik-inspired fads.)

The nature of the public revulsion is also quite instructive. It was in very few places that TDP leaders and cadres themselves participated in the movement to restore NTR to power. Most of them have little love for him, and would have perhaps defected to Bhaskara Rao's side had they followed their inclinations. They resented his arrogant treatment of them; they resented the fact that he would not let them peacefully amass even one per

cent of the wealth that he himself had done in films; and they resented the organisational domination of NTR's two sons-in-law over the party. There was more than a grain of truth in Bhaskara Rao's lament that all the MLAs would jump to his side if NTR released them from his camp and set them free, except that it was not NTR, but the public revulsion that stayed their feet. And this applies to not only the MLAs but most of the party's leaders and cadres. Therefore, they all sat resolutely on the fence, determined to watch out the show. It was not they who fought for NTR's restoration, but the outraged common people and the so-called cadre-based opposition parties, the communists and the BJP, who had, at long last, found some work to do. It was the communists in the coastal districts, and the BJP in Telangana which led the bandhs, the rallies and the hunger strikes; and in Rayalaseema,[12] it was the common people who took spontaneously to the streets and protested violently against the dismissal of NTR. They selectively burnt and looted central government property, and the houses of MLAs who had defected to Bhaskara Rao's side. Twenty-five persons were killed in police firings, including twenty-three in the Rayalaseema districts and two on the outskirts of Hyderabad city.

III

Unlike Jesus Christ, who rose on the third day, NTR's resurrection took one full month. That month must have been a period of agony and chastisement for him. Here he was, a messiah of the Telugu people, created specially by the gods to do noble deeds, forced to go around tending his fickle flock of 162 MLAs, exhibiting them to all and sundry, and pleading that they should *please* count the number and aver whether it was not more than half of 294. People were writing erudite articles about the Constitution and the role of the governor, whereas as far as NTR could see, all that was needed was this little bit of arithmetic. But nobody would count them. Ram Lal, with the brazenness befitting an underworld operator, all but told him to go to hell, and got him arrested by the police; Zail Singh[13] was more polite but instead of counting the number merely promised elliptically that he would do his best to save democracy (leaving NTR to guess whether that meant *he* would be saved); and the suave and learned Shankar Dayal Sharma,[14] who replaced Ram Lal as governor of the state,

[12] Region of the state consisting of the four southern districts of Chittoor, Cuddapah, Kurnool and Anantapur.
[13] Giani Zail Singh (1916–94) was the then president of India (1982–87).
[14] Sharma (1918–99) was later vice-president and president of India during the period 1992–97.

pleaded for time and went to Tirupati to pray to the Lord. By this time, NTR must have been a terribly frustrated man; here were 162 men and women, hard solid objective *facts* as any positivist could wish to see, and yet this slippery brahmin at Raj Bhavan wanted the help of God to safeguard the Constitution and democracy, whereas all that he needed was an abacus to count them. This period of 'constitutional crisis' in AP was in reality a very hilarious period, to those who could see the humour of it. Here was the most democratic and secular Constitution of the Third World, which could be saved only by God and 162 'purchasable' MLAs, who had to be guarded at a summer resort against their own temptation.

In the end, it was neither God nor the Constitution that saved NTR, but the violent and sustained popular reaction, which successfully kept the defections down to a minimum, and Indira Gandhi's opportunistic handling of the situation. She has perhaps set a record in successfully playing a 'heads-I-win-tails-you-lose' game. NTR fell when she willed, and he did not rise again till she willed again—and he was made to see this humiliating fact. There has been much sensationalist speculation on the 'secret' agreement reached between him and Indira Gandhi, and many go-betweens have been suggested, including a former director-general of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. Irrespective of whether any such definite agreement has been reached or not, the fact remains that NTR has been taught his lesson, and has been allowed to ascend to the throne once again only after being cut down to the size that suits not only Indira Gandhi but, more importantly, 'his own people'. Hereafter, or so they expect, he will stop his sabre-rattling and behave as a responsible broker in getting them better terms with the Centre. It is NTR's personal tragedy that he could replace Bhaskara Rao only by becoming a replacement for him.

Indira Gandhi

An Attempt at a Political Appraisal

EPW, 23 March 1985

The understanding of Indian reality by the left has been seriously burdened by an ideological albatross, which is the notion that the Indian ruling class is morally required to *build* the nation, as against merely making wealth for itself. Ever since the celebrated tryst that Nehru spoke of, left analysts have been maintaining a balance sheet on behalf of the destiny, and periodically heaping praise or bitter blame on the ruling classes according to the shape of the closing accounts. Some have even christened the ruling class as the national bourgeoisie and have accepted its interests as the national consensus, its achievements as the nation's achievements, and its failures as the nation's failures. Others have not, but the peculiar prejudice that the ruling class *ought* to lead the country into its future remains strong with many in the left. It is within this matrix that Nehru becomes many things from the proponent of a liberal modernism to the hero of the nation, and Indira Gandhi uniformly its Judas. He is the builder of the nation's cherished institutions and she the treacherous destroyer of that wealth.

It is perhaps time, now that we are well into the second generation of our post-colonial existence, to set our sights right, and there is no better occasion for this exercise than Indira Gandhi's death,[1] for the event has

[1] She was assassinated by her own bodyguards at her official residence in New Delhi on 31 October 1984.

brought out this attitude in all its shallowness. All manner of unlikely persons expressed shock and disbelief at the event and started counting their beads for the future of the nation. While, certainly, of all the ways in which she might have died, this has been the least unlikely for many years now, and it required no astrologer to say so, nor much dialectical cerebration for that matter.

I

No ruling class ever *builds* the nation except as a (not incidental but essential) by-product of the process of enriching itself. And its history, which willy-nilly becomes part of the core of the nation's history, is told not in terms of any presumed compact it has made with destiny, but in terms of the contradictions inherent in the process of enriching itself. And it is within this history that the role of any individual needs to be located, and not in sententious moralisms of faith and betrayal.

To begin at the beginning, the first problem that the Indian ruling class faced after taking over power from the British was twofold. One, to build a viable polity that would hold together the diverse sections of the ruling class, and would attract the loyalty of the masses; two, to build the industrial and infrastructural base required for their enrichment. All the answers they found to these problems had as their instrument the state. Etatism, it has been recognised, is a major aspect of post-colonial Indian reality. Functioning as the mobiliser, the deficit creator, and the distributor of surplus wealth, the state has created the industrial and infrastructural base for enriching the propertied classes through import-substituting manufacture and technologically modernised agriculture. It has spread its tentacles far and wide and is a painless source of capital for the industrial entrepreneur; it is painless in many senses. State capital undertakes all the unprofitable investment in basic and infrastructural industries and supplies most of the products cheap to the entrepreneur; to undertake the investment, it robs the poor and cadges on imperialism without taxing him too painfully; it does not demand as a precondition that he cut off his debilitating links with imperialism (indeed the state itself is heavily dependent on foreign capital); and finally the state finances much of his enterprise through loans of public financial institutions without asking for a commensurate say in the running of the enterprise, a peculiar etatist fraud on the public that the Bombay High Court has recently declared to be not only proper but inviolable to boot in its judgment in the Swraj Paul case.

To the rural gentry, the state is equally munificent. The story of agrarian change in India since 1947 is quite complex. But the essential point is that

with the abolition of jagirs[2] and hereditary watans[3] and the threat (more than the implementation) of tenancy reforms, the Indian village gradually settled down to its post-colonial shape. Some of the landlords hastily disposed of their land, but the recipients and the remnants, together with the bigger of the ex-tenants, soon settled down to coalesce into a very heterogeneous class of landlords. The state has helped in the further development of the contours of this class. It has ensured that no land ceiling laws would touch the landlords except to impel them to sell off the less profitable of their acres; it has undertaken infrastructural investment in irrigation and rural electrification to prepare the ground for the technological modernisation of this class; it has compensated for what they lost in social authority (as a consequence of the process of democratisation of rural India unleashed by peasant movements) by placing in their hands the financial and administrative paraphernalia of development (rural banks and cooperatives, panchayati raj institutions, etc); it has promptly dispatched the police and the paramilitary to their aid whenever their tenants or bataidars or labourers rebelled; and by and by, it begged and borrowed from imperialism on their behalf and provided them with Green Revolution technology; it did all this without demanding that they give up their old habits of domination and old methods of exploitation; indeed, it has reinforced these habits by reaching down to the gentry and strengthening their hands by putting itself at their disposal; where an enterprising rich peasantry has developed, it has soon enough acquired the habits and the culture of this gentry. It is a wrong notion that rural India is described as semi-feudal because there has not been enough change; it is also semi-feudal *because* of the nature of the change that has occurred.

In this process, the state has turned out to be the single biggest capitalist in India, with one public institution like the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) alone possessing assets worth five times that of the largest family of Indian monopolists. This state is simultaneously a parasite on society and an object for the parasitism of the propertied classes. Their wealth is deficient in the prime quality of genuine capital, an autonomous capacity for self-expansion; instead, it can expand only on condition that the state allows it and helps it to expand. Not all the brave postures of shackled initiative that they are putting on these days can obscure this fact. This situation is well described by the maoist concept of *bureaucrat* capital, but Indian

[2] Jagirdars are army chieftains who were granted small territory by the ruler for management of his army and providing services. The Andhra Pradesh (Telangana Area) (Abolition of Jagirs) 1358 Fasli Act abolished jagirs.

[3] Watandars were chief agents through whom the state collected village revenue.

analysts have unfortunately vulgarised that expression to mean the capital employed in the public sector. Indian capital, as such, is bureaucrat, that is to say, it is a parasite on the state.

This describes the state in one aspect, the state vis-à-vis the propertied classes. In its other aspect, the state has created the network of patronage that is the only real thread (the rest being illusory) that links the loyalty of the masses to the ruling classes. It is through the state that the ruling classes enrich themselves and it is through the state that they lay claim to the loyalty of the masses. Unlike early American ideology, which admired its pushing capitalists, Indian ideology does not even pretend to love its capitalists and landlords. If any obscure harijan or tribal ever expresses sentiments of loyalty to the system, that is only on the ground that 'it is the *sarkar* that gave me my pair of bullocks'; or half an acre of barely cultivable land, or whatever has been his lot.

Built around this structure is an ideology, comprising components like socialism, self-reliance, modernisation, liberal democracy, secularism and anti-imperialism. State enterprise is identified with socialism, import substitution with self-reliance, fertilisers with modernisation, votes with liberal democracy, multilateral communalism with secularism, and the ability to play the USSR against the US with anti-imperialism. It is difficult to decide to what extent this ideology was genuine, in the sense of a false belief that is not *felt* to be false; perhaps, for many of the left intellectuals who worked the hardest at its legitimisation, it *was* genuine, but for the rulers themselves, it probably never was. However, what is germane is that this structure and its ideology did have a certain capacity for achievement. A heavy industrial base was built, enabling the capitalist class to accumulate and transform itself into its role as an industrial comprador class, the late imperialist counterpart of the trading comprador class of the colonial era. Irrigation projects were undertaken and the ground was partially cleared for the Green Revolution. Throughout the 1950s and up to the mid-1960s, the economy, and agricultural production as part of it, maintained a steady rate of growth, even at a rather low rate of investment. Capital and technology aid from the imperialists flowed freely into the country. And the value of the rupee remained steady. The people were kept patriotic and quiescent (which mean the same thing) by the distribution of 5 per cent of patronage and 95 per cent of expectations. The sheer size of the country and its undoubted cultural and material potential made its voice heard in the international arena; and the same factors also made the various sections of the propertied classes wait expectantly for their turn without indulging in too much of unseemly squabbling. True, they often played their dirty

games, but not without a certain sense of shame. In a word all was, or seemed to be, well with the country. Only Kashmir and the Northeast gave some trouble but even this was not a consequence of the internal political economy of the land but was a legacy of the transfer of power from the British, and there was little protest in the land when unethical and brutal measures were employed to tackle these troubles.

At the risk of sounding deliberately provocative, it must be said that it was Nehru's good fortune that he ruled the country during this period. It is doubtful that an impartial history would judge Nehru to have been a great man. In history, it is impossible to separate the eminence of an individual from that of the class he represents, and the eminence of a class can only be decided in terms of its urge to push to the maximum extent the limits of its objective possibilities. The Indian ruling class, even during the first decade and a half when it had some genuine achievements to its credit, exhibited no such urge. Like a petty *dalal*, it was content to balance its register each evening. But this is an aside.

II

It would be a vulgar (in the sense of non-dialectical) exercise to search for any date wherein this peace was shattered. A social system should not be akin to a tank that slowly gets filled up to its potential and then breaches one fine day. A social system has no predetermined boundaries, but only internal contradictions that explore and shape the boundaries as they work themselves out; the system discovers and simultaneously exposes its limitations as it develops itself. Sometimes, it realises its limitations by taking an extravagant jump and crashing into them. The Indian Green Revolution is a case in point.

It is generally agreed that the crisis of the system that was structured in the 1950s started becoming apparent from the mid-1960s. The thesis of a secular deceleration of the Indian economy has been controverted, but the period from the mid-1960s till the proclamation of the Emergency was a negative period for the economy. The growth of national income decelerated, the rate of investment dropped, the value of the rupee started falling steadily, there were two years of drought followed by recession, and the foreigners were less forthcoming with aid. During the 1970s, there was a lot of analysis of this gloomy picture. Most of the analysts focused attention on the etatist nature of the polity, or what is more properly described as the bureaucrat nature of Indian capital, and, therefore, sought answers in an analysis of the inability of the state to invest sufficient amounts of capital in a sufficiently rational manner. The answers obtained have varied over the

years both in their politics and in the degree of optimism. In the beginning, they were pessimistic and focused on class factors like massive poverty that severely constricts the internal market, or the consumer goods orientation of the sizeable private sector that immobilises precious capital, or the backward and unproductive nature of the subsidised and poorly taxed rural rich, and so on. But recently, given that the rate of investment has reached respectable levels and the economy is not only back to the 4 per cent rate of growth but has acquired a perceptibly modern pigmentation to boot, the answers have tended to be less pessimistic and less political, focusing instead on structural inefficiencies and bottlenecks. For my purpose, which is a political analysis of the developments that helped create Indira Gandhi, it is not very important to know which of these is the correct answer, or to be alarmed at the prospect of the deluge that is yet to come. Indeed, most of these answers are not answers but merely reformulations of the question in concrete economic terms.

At a very broad level, the cause of the crisis is that an economy which exhibits semi-feudal relations of exploitation over a large area and is dominated by a dependent bureaucrat capital, is incapable of developing rapidly and rationally. But to acknowledge this cause does not by itself suffice to explain the din and the bustle, the humour and the devilry, of Indian politics. The principal contradiction posits an abstract crisis; in fact, it manifests itself in the logic of all the *real* crises. In the course of the constrained activity of real human beings, it takes the phenomenal form of a series of real crises, each of which may potentially be the last crisis, but none of which is preordained to be absolutely the last crisis. The nature and course of these real crises cannot be determined *a priori,* and once and for all, they cannot be predicted by the principal contradiction, but have to be followed up by an analysis of the social activity of the various classes. Moreover, the crisis posited by the principal contradiction, being the abstract and overall crisis, is one that focuses on failure, on the inability of the system to withstand its history. But no system ever slides linearly down into failure. Rather, the sequential *real* crises within this crisis of failure are crises of success that get entangled in the contradictions of the system and either get resolved and lift the system to a new plateau or end with the final breakdown of the system. Every living organism must ultimately die. The contradiction between life and death, between growth and decay, must end in death and in decay. But no organism merely decays to its death. Its life comprises a series of crises, each of which is a crisis of *growth* that gets caught in its own contradictions. It is when marxists do not realise this that they sound apocalyptic, and boringly so. It is the successes within the

failure, the development within the underdevelopment, the 'crisis within the crisis', that account for the dynamics of a society.

What started in the mid-1960s was the first real crisis in which the principal contradiction of the Indian political economy manifested itself. During the first decade after the takeover of power from the British, a certain structure was built and a certain set of relations among the various sections of the propertied classes, between the state and those classes, and between the working masses and those classes, were determined. This structure was the form through which the productive forces had to be developed. It had a successful first innings, and the productive forces did develop up to a point. But starting with the mid-1960s, the newly unleashed productive forces began to clash with the structure; with the ambitious jump forward taken through the Green Revolution, the clash became a head-on collision. This 'crisis within the crisis' unleashed class conflicts in various forms. The working masses themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, perceived the crisis to be that of the overall system and rebelled against it; but the propertied classes, with their historical myopia, mistook the phenomenon for the essence and demanded a realignment of the structure, a redefinition of the relations of the propertied classes vis-à-vis each other, vis-à-vis the state, and vis-à-vis the nation's wealth. While the people asked for an end to the system of exploitation, the propertied classes wanted to scrap the Industrial Policy Resolution and the Agricultural Prices Commission. The crisis and reactions to it are best studied through three points of tension, corresponding to the three principal class groupings of the country, including the monopoly capitalist class and the big bourgeoisie in general; the rural gentry and the closely linked provincial small bourgeoisie; and the mass of the working people, both urban and rural.

The first is linked with what some analysts have identified as the distinction between the early and the late phases of import substitution. The early phase is the easy phase wherein local capital manages to displace imperialism in the manufacture of the (by then) traditional varieties of consumer goods, including (as in the case of a relatively strong capitalist class like that of India) consumer durables like motor cars. The late and difficult phase is linked to the 'ambitious' desire to undertake the manufacture of more sophisticated designs and of capital goods. The attempt at import substitution during this phase becomes so difficult that the illusion of self-reliance is torn away and it stands out as the essentially comprador relation that it is. To take the most obvious instance, during the first phase, the Fiat car gets slowly indigenised through Premier India, but during the second phase, Maruti is merely an auspicious Hindu prefix

for the Japanese Suzuki. But what is important here is that there is no God-given or genuine technological obstacle to self-reliant transformation from the first to the second phase. What is entailed is that during the first phase, the capitalist class (including the state) bothers to replace imperialist capital to some extent in its eagerness to convert itself into an industrial class, but once it has acquired a blast furnace of its own, then it is content to accumulate comprador capital on that basis. If some left intellectuals mistook the first phase for anti-imperialist national-bourgeois development, then that is entirely their private illusion.

This transition creates serious crises of all varieties. Self-reliance now becomes a shibboleth and a worn-out cliché. The scions and the paid hacks of the monopoly houses write stringent articles in the glossy periodicals that have come up during this period, deriding the outdated 'ideological' and unpragmatic notion of self-reliance. The public sector bureaucrat behaves with equal vehemence in rejecting 'ideology'. The etatism of the 1950s too comes under attack. It is not that capital has now ceased to be bureaucrat, but it merely wants a redefinition of the terms of the etatism. The state, to which was earlier relegated the duty of doing the heavy work of building an industrial base without including profit, is now required to function more efficiently, and to concentrate less on enterprise and more on finance, and on aid and technology brokerage with the imperialists. The state as entrepreneur, therefore, comes in for all kinds of taunts and jibes, much to the irritation of the Nehruvian leftist who had taught himself to worship it as the womb of Indian socialism. But the Nehruvian does have a point: it is astonishing how brazenly the champions of a class that cannot manufacture a lube of toothpaste efficiently, attack the public sector for not running the railways on schedule. But the poor Nehruvian is alone in his chagrin. Even within his cherished public sector, the fashionable trend is for giving up 'ideology' and accepting 'accountability', which is an ideological notion meaning profitability. Altogether, a vociferous demand for the opening up of the economy and the privatisation of the public sector piles up.

The second source of tension is the Green Revolution. Whether the Green Revolution has had any impact on Indian agriculture is a much-debated question. The answer depends upon how one defines the term and what measure of its impact one uses. If it is defined as the employment of HYV [high-yielding variety] seeds and the attendant technology, and if its impact is measured by the increase in per acre productivity, then the accepted answer has been that it has had no impact outside of Punjab and Haryana. But it is not clear why anyone other than the Planning Commission would be interested in such a narrow and distorted definition of the problem. If

we define it broadly to mean agricultural modernisation that was initiated in the 1950s through irrigation projects, rural cooperatives and rural electrification, and culminated in the widespread use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and HYV seeds, and if we measure its impact, not by the imputed objective of increasing all-round productivity but by the real objective of further enriching the rural rich, then the success has been quite significant. And if we distance ourselves further from the empiricism of statistical analysis by reckoning its success in terms of the appetite it has aroused in the rural rich (which is extremely relevant for political analysis), then its success has been quite phenomenal. Indeed, the fact that it has aroused considerable appetite which it cannot satisfy is the point wherein the contradiction between the development of the productive forces in agriculture and the way in which the economy has been structured (the 'crisis within the crisis') stands revealed. The fact of this incapacity of the system to keep its promises has gradually dawned on the rural gentry over the last ten to fifteen years. And given the capacity of this class to mobilise the rich and middle peasantry behind it, and given the close—though not necessarily amiable—connections it has with the provincial trader, entrepreneur and professional class through ties of blood and commerce, the disaffection has rebounded with a resonance. If the resonance has not always been very loud, that is because the propertied classes of India are scared of airing their grievances too loudly for fear of setting a bad example. But it has certainly made itself heard in the rapid decay of the political structure and the cultural ethos of the ruling classes. By about the mid-1970s, the Indian state was faced with the disquieting prospect of the propertied classes turning unpatriotic. From Khalistan to the Shetkari Sanghatana to the Telugu Desam Party, the avowed ideals, and the methods and the degree of disloyalty have varied immensely, but the disaffection is quite real.

The third source of tension needs no elaborate charting. The loyalty of the broad masses of the working people rested on the illusory basis of fat promises, and the thin real basis of state patronage, and both of them soon evaporated. It is to the credit of the communists that even if they were initially duped by the illusion, they were at least the first to reflect the disillusionment. The split in the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1964 was essentially a consequence of this re-evaluation of the ruling class and the polity, and had nothing to do with the youthful delinquencies of Dange[4]

[4] Shripad Amrit Dange, popularly known as S.A. Dange (1899–1991), was a founding member of the CPI.

or the Sino–Soviet dispute. Added to this disillusionment were two other factors: the misery caused by the deepening economic crisis, and the fact that as state patronage to the rural rich increased, they became more and more oppressive. At the next step, it was Naxalbari[5] that made this break resoundingly clear. Since that time, there have been widespread revolts of the rural poor in the plains and of the tribals in the forests. While the struggles in the plains have invariably been led by militant left organisations, the tribal struggles have found a variety of leaders, including avowed gandhians. The only ostensible reason as to why this 'development' has devastated the lives of the tribals so much is that almost any politics would be forced into struggles once it enters their midst. The average forest-dweller today consumes perhaps half of what his forefathers did half a century ago, and that is the stark truth.

III

It was not ordained anywhere that Lal Bahadur Shastri[6] should die prematurely, nor that the Congress old guard[7] should make a hash of the succession. In this sense (and only in this sense), it was an accident that Indira Gandhi was called upon to preside over this crisis more or less since its inception. Nothing else about her actions or her personality was accidental.

Indira Gandhi's career as prime minister is easily divided into two periods: the first is the period from her accession till the defeat at the hands of the Janata Party in 1977, while the second is the period from her return to power in 1980 till her death. This most obvious division is also the *objective* division, the line drawn by the objective historical process. During the first period, the economic crisis and the disaffection of the masses constituted the main problems. The disaffection of the propertied classes was as yet very much incipient. Indeed, the Green Revolution and the further industrialisation of the economy, which were undertaken during this period with imperialist aid and advice as an answer to the economic crisis, further intensified and brought out the disaffection, even as they gave the polity the pigmentation of an industrial economy. But that was as yet in the future. For the present, none of the major political changes of the period signified

[5] Naxalbari is the name of a village in Darjeeling district of West Bengal where a left-wing peasant uprising began in March 1967.
[6] Succeeded Jawaharlal Nehru as prime minister in 1964. He died of a heart attack in Tashkent, former USSR, in 1966.
[7] After Nehru's death, a struggle ensued between the Congress old guard, also known as the 'Syndicate', and younger elements of the party. Morarji Desai and Sanjeeva Reddy were part of the 'old guard'.

the consequence of a struggle within the ruling classes. Even the split in the Congress was no exception. It was the answer to two vital needs of the polity in the context of the economic crisis and the mass disaffection as indicated by Naxalbari and the poor performance of the Congress in the 1967 elections. The needs were that the state should tighten its reins further, and that it should turn populist. Indira Gandhi's manipulations achieved both aims. The successful war with Pakistan was an external factor that helped the process, but it was by no means an accidental godsend. Both the tightening of the reins of the state and the adoption of populist postures necessitated greater reliance on the Soviet Union, and that closeness was certainly an important factor in the Bangladesh war.[8] Not only did Indira Gandhi achieve these immediate aims, but within half a decade, she was quite successful in containing mass disaffection, and it appears now that she was even successful in pulling the economy out of the deceleration crisis. The tribal and peasant revolts in Naxalbari, Srikakulam and Bihar were brutally suppressed, and so were the more heterogeneous and essentially petty bourgeois uprisings in Bihar and Gujarat. It was necessary to suspend the parliamentary democratic process to fulfil these objectives, and she did so without hesitation through the Emergency. It was also necessary to suspend civil liberties, and she did so through imposition of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), through the widespread use of the Disturbed Areas Act in Andhra, and through the employment of murderous hoodlums in the streets of Calcutta. Brutal measures were called for, and brutal measures were adopted. More than 1,000 persons were killed in the process in police firings and in fake 'encounters' in this period.

As mentioned above, the disaffection of the propertied classes was highly incipient during the first period of Indira Gandhi's reign. It was only during this period that they were beginning to realise that the structure of yesterday was becoming a hindrance. At this stage, it was the objective duty of Indira Gandhi to stand by the structure; and since the structure was etatist and the disaffection came from the wealthy, this necessity merged neatly with the populism demanded for other reasons, and resulted in her fiercely anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist and anti-landlord postures. There were further bouts of land reform laws, and pieces of legislation like the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), 1973, and the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Act, 1969, which are all to be understood both from the angle of populism and the need to preserve the

[8] The India–Pakistan war of 1971, as a consequence of which East Pakistan was 'liberated' by India and a new nation, Bangladesh, was formed.

specific structure of the polity against the incubatory disaffection of the rich, who wanted a different alignment of the structure. Indira Gandhi herself never had any convictions other than the determination to do her job.

In the process of this more or less successful management of the crisis, many old values and habits and norms were upset. Cheating, double-dealing and falsehood entered the politics of the ruling classes in a big way. Left analysts, taking the cue from her bourgeois opponents, irrationally blame Indira Gandhi for this debasement. In reality, she was merely the most brazen exponent (this much must be granted to her personal critics) of the ethos of the period, which continues down to our day. The propertied classes are losing faith in their system and consequently, their culture has been degenerating at a steady pace, and nobody and no sphere of life has been exempted from the taint. Well-meaning intellectuals—including quite a few left intellectuals, who continue to exhibit an anachronistic nationalism as if we are still in the 1930s—bewail this as the degeneration of 'our' culture, but it is not 'our' culture that is degenerating. For simultaneously, there has been a remarkable regeneration of people's culture across the land, taking a variety of organisational forms, some militant left and some vaguely progressive. It appears that when the people become unpatriotic, they turn creative, but when propertied classes become unpatriotic, they turn vulgar. And the more public the form of social consciousness is, the more blatant is the vulgarity that it exhibits. Since politics, the theatre and religion are the three most public of all the forms of social consciousness, it is in these spheres that the vulgarity of the ruling classes has been most evident. It is small wonder then that soon enough film stars, *babas* and political leaders started keeping happy company.

But this is a digression. To get back to the narrative, the lifting of the Emergency revealed two disturbing facts. One, that the people's disaffection had by no means been suppressed, and two, that the disaffection of the propertied classes had burst out of the womb. The period since the lifting of the Emergency till today has seen popular struggles that are widespread, militant and better organised than the struggles of the pre-Emergency period; and it has also seen a new phenomenon: quite open squabbling within the propertied classes, often taking mass forms that have confused the left very badly. The propertied classes, from the monopoly capitalist class down to the small-town commercial bourgeoisie and the rural gentry, are gearing up for a realignment of the structure, a redefinition of its parameters, a solution to the 'crisis within the crisis', and they are also fighting among themselves because each one of them hopes to be in, or at least close to, the driver's seat when the new alignment takes shape. The best place to look

for evidence of this phenomenon is the political and cultural superstructure. It is unfortunate that marxist analysts, having taught themselves that the economy is primary, look for evidence of change in economic indices, as if history is written by regression equations. (The fact that too many marxist intellectuals are economists has been bad for Indian politics.) In times of class struggle—including intra-class struggle—it is the superstructure that becomes lively. When the drabbest hacks who write centre-page articles in the daily press start producing scintillating prose, then that is a sure enough sign that something is cooking. (As a very recent example, the panic caused among the Indian monopolists by Swraj Paul produced the best pieces of invective written by their scribes.)

The inability of the Janata Party to hold together is merely the inability of any one of these contending classes to take charge of the affairs and settle the 'crisis within the crisis' in its favour. During that period, the greatest fear of the urban bourgeoisie was that the rural gentry would take the lead. The fear received its justification in the aggressiveness of the gentry, which revealed itself in the open and uninhibited attacks on 'urban-oriented Nehruism' as well as the ruthlessness with which they mobilised their caste-fellows to assault the agricultural labourers in the Hindi-speaking states. The fear of the urban bourgeoisie, in turn, is signified by nothing better than the savageness with which their normally staid press (which is usually called the national press) attacked Charan Singh.[9] He has certainly been the most maligned of all Indian politicians. He is known to be incorruptible, an able administrator, and certainly the only bourgeois politician after Nehru with a well worked out and viable economic philosophy of his own. Indeed, in this matter, he is perhaps a cut above Nehru, since he is his own Mahalanobis.[10] And yet he has been the target of savage attacks as an obscurantist (which he is not) and an opportunist (which they all are), especially during the short period when he was 'interim' prime minister of the country, by the grace of Sanjeeva Reddy,[11] another *kisan*, as the gentry like to describe themselves.

Their own inability to settle the issue scared the ruling classes so much that they started looking for a saviour who would hold things together with a whip in the hand; within the confines of parliamentary politics, there was only one such saviour: Indira Gandhi. And the imperialists, both

[9] Prime minister of India during the period July 1979–January 1980.

[10] P.C. Mahalanobis (1893–1972), a scientist and applied statistician, founded the Indian Statistical Institute and as member of the Planning Commission, contributed prominently to India's five-year plans.

[11] President of India (1977–82).

of the East and the West, were equally keen to put an end to the 'anarchy'. They knew well that irrespective of how the structure was realigned, it would continue to be comprador; what they wanted was a quick resolution one way or the other, or at least stability. These reasons themselves do not explain why Indira Gandhi was voted back to power in 1980, but it is certain that if she had not been, and if the vote had not put an end to the anarchy, some other—and not necessarily constitutional—way out would have been found.

However, Indira Gandhi in her second innings was not the same as before. It is not that she had aged, but the conditions had changed. The people she could handle. She knew how to get their votes and she knew how to get them killed. She handled them during this period as she had during the first. She broke the back of the textile workers of Bombay, and she broke the heads of the rebellious tribals in central India, and the agrarian poor in Bihar and in Andhra Pradesh. But the squabbling of the propertied classes was something she could not handle. The same squabbling that brought down the Janata Party now shifted into her party and took the form of the peculiar Congress phenomenon: dissidence. After all, the change in government had not resolved the crisis; it had merely set up a new medium for its expression. And she did not know what to do. She threw out leaders, broke up cabinets, dissolved assemblies, and in desperation cried, 'Off with his head!' like another paranoid queen. But nothing worked. Even less did she know what to do when the crisis took the form of new messiahs and mass movements outside her party. She manoeuvred and she manipulated, she conferred and she dilly-dallied, she lied and she cheated, she sent in the army and she killed, but she could never come to terms with the phenomenon. Some of the squabbling classes she could satisfy to some extent. The devaluation of the public sector and the opening up of the economy are two stark shifts that she initiated as soon as she came back to power, and this has gone down well with most sections of the ruling classes, particularly the urban capitalists. As the *Indian Express* said editorially (5 March): 'There is a consensus today that the economy needs to be opened up.' From the fiery radical of the early 1970s, she was now the mature leader, who had no faith in 'isms', as the cliché goes. Indeed, the change was already perceptible during the Emergency period when she allowed her younger son[12] to slap her communist fellow-travellers in the face, and she herself frequently talked of an 'Indian road', neither capitalist nor

[12] Sanjay Gandhi (1946–80), the man who orchestrated the excesses of the Emergency. He died in an air crash in New Delhi.

socialist, and contemptuously asked the communists what they had achieved. But the change really got going after 1980. In this regard, the 'national consensus' of the 1950s stands destroyed; but this change is not a full resolution of the 'crisis within the crisis', as the same editorial goes on to lament, for a new national consensus of the exploiting classes has yet to emerge. The heterogeneity of the Indian exploiting classes makes this necessary if the system has to get over its first crisis and move on to a higher plateau. And her failure to achieve the consensus, her failure to structure a new alignment of the relations of these classes that would once again win the system their loyalty, and once again set the proactive forces moving forward, in a word, her failure to provide room for the chickens of development that have come home to roost, was the failure of her career. It was this failure that finished her. One crisis after another led her down the ladder. Assam confused her, Andhra Pradesh confounded her, and Punjab killed her.

IV

By the time of her death, Indira Gandhi had completed the destruction of the ideological overgrowth of the system. There is no more talk of socialism, which is declared to be alternatively un-Indian and outdated; as for land reforms, there is no more land to be distributed, as everybody knows; secularism she laid bare by making it a point to visit every temple, every dargah, every church and every gurdwara she found on her way, and even more blatantly, by inciting Hindu communalism in Jammu and Muslim communalism in Assam; liberal democracy was buried by the forced charade of elections in Assam, and the incredibly undemocratic Terrorist Affected Areas Act, following upon the massacre in Amritsar (parenthetically, it is the final sign of the demise of the liberal intelligentsia of this land that such an Act is allowed to govern 15 million Punjabis without more than a murmur of protest elsewhere); anti-imperialism is a virtue that she herself regarded with a certain amount of contempt during her last days, though Moscow and its fellow-travellers continued to credit her with it.

This is what makes her son Rajiv Gandhi's task that much more difficult. The twin problems that his mother faced remain before him. The disillusionment of the people with the system is by now complete. They talk of it with nothing but contempt even as they queue up to vote. And the urgent need for a new national consensus of the exploiting classes is still to be satisfied. The first has no solution other than brute power, for populism has reached the point wherein it does not enjoy even marginal credibility. It will succeed as long as the armed might of the state (with the help of the Soviets and also the Americans, if need be) is superior to the collective strength of the masses. Once that point is passed, then there is nothing more to be done except sing a requiem for the dead. But the second problem could be dealt with through less tragic solutions, provided the right instruments can be devised, for all the instruments used in the past are in a shambles today. Whether Rajiv Gandhi is capable of fabricating and using them is a moot point. Till now, his main asset has been the fact that Indian politicians, like racehorses, are first judged by their pedigree and only later by their track record. His pedigree is unexceptionable but such track record as is available to date can cause no joy to those who want to save the 'nation' from chaos. His election speeches have been characterised by a wooden monotony that stands in sharp contrast to the finesse demanded by the problem that he faces. To put it in the language of 'scientific management' that he and his cronies are said to be partial to, the variables are too many, the constraints are too complex, the feasibility region is disconnected, and the objective is unclear. It will require much more than a bright-eyed admiration for computers to handle the crisis. Whether or not he can succeed is the problem of the propertied classes, but if he fails, that can create quite serious problems for the masses.

The Karamchedu Killings

The Essence of the NTR Phenomenon

EPW, 3 August 1985

'He who sets his heart on Lord Krishna and thinks of him steadfastly gets as much benefit as from an *Aswametha yajna;* he who does *pranam* to Lord Krishna verily gets ten times the benefit . . .' Thus blares a brahmin's honeyed voice from the loudspeaker fitted at the top of a two-storeyed building in the village of Karamchedu. Just beneath the loudspeaker is a painted board which says that the top storey of the building—or a part of it—houses a Lakshmi mandiram and the picture rises before the mind's eye of devout housewives of caste-Hindu landed families sitting cross-legged on the floor nodding their heads in appreciation as the brahmin goes on to say that 'one should hear the secrets of the Gita[1] from a man born to noble *samskaras,* and one understands the message according to the samskaras of one's birth'.

The day is Monday, 22 July 1985. Just five days earlier, a 3,000-strong mob of caste-Hindu (kamma, to be precise) landholders of the village had assaulted the madigas[2] *en masse* and killed six men and raped three girls. As the Gita *pathan* goes on in the Lakshmi mandiram, barely twenty of the 300 madiga families are in the village. The others have fled the village, to look after the injured in the hospitals at Chirala or Guntur; or to seek refuge in a church compound in Chirala. The walls of the church say, 'Come unto Me' in bold letters; they came unto Him (in part because most of the madigas are Christians, and in part because He is in possession of the most durable structure in Chirala), but He has given them no better shelter than the shade of a couple of mango trees, which can protect them from neither the sun nor the rain.

Karamchedu is a large, prosperous village of Prakasam district in coastal Andhra. Like the other coastal villages of this district, it is a major cultivator of cotton and tobacco. The resultant prosperity of some of the local inhabitants is evident from the well-built and quite slick-looking (instead of the erstwhile shoddy) buildings with TV antennae sticking out from the top, the presence of a substantial number of scooters, motorcycles and tractors, and even an odd car slushing through the muddy streets.

Most of this wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few kamma landlord families, with one of them, Daggupati Chenchuramaiah, being none less than the father of NTR's son-in-law and leader of the TDP's youth wing, Venkateswara Rao.[3] Among the others are well-known film producers, not to mention lesser operators of the film business. While not all the kammas in the village are rich, the fact that their community is about 6,000 strong in a village of 10,000 people has imbued the dominant sections of the community with tremendous power. And they appear to have put it to good use. The stronghold they have over this prosperous and 'developed' looking village is remarkable. The madigas and malas (the two major harijan[4] castes in Andhra Pradesh) of the village, together comprising about 450 households, live in conditions reminiscent of the helot age of ancient India. Most of them own no land (just sixteen of the 300 madiga families possess land, and that too just about half an acre), and depend for their sustenance entirely upon leasing in or labouring upon the land of the peasants or landlords. Those who lease in land are forced to perform chores in the landlords' fields or houses, in addition to paying the rent. The annual farm-servant *(paleru)* is paid about Rs 2,000; if he is unable to complete the full year's work for which he has been contracted, he is forced to quit without being paid a single paisa. One day's absence at work entails that

[1] The Bhagavad Gita or Gita in short, comprising about 700 verses in Sanskrit, is considered to be part of the epic Mahabharata; some scholars argue that it was a latter-day interpolation. This text, in modern times, has come to be considered the Word of God by Hindus. The Gita upholds *varnashrama-dharma*, the ideological backbone of the caste system.

[2] The second largest dalit community in Andhra Pradesh.

[3] Former Rajya Sabha member and husband of present (2009–) union minister Purandareswari in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

[4] The word 'dalit' was not in vogue then as it is today. In fact, after the Karamchedu killings, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) insisted that they be addressed not as harijans but as dalits—the oppressed/broken people.

he would be beaten and manhandled. In the words of Tella Judson, a madiga of the village, 'a paleru who has worked all the year cannot be sure of getting his payment until the last month is through, and the crop is harvested and deposited in the landlord's granary'. The payment for daily wage labour is also surprisingly low by coastal Andhra standards. The men are paid about Rs 10 to 12 and the women Rs 6 to 8.

The harijans do not appear to have received much help in resisting this domination. The left in coastal Andhra has generally been more popular among the propertied classes (especially in the villages), leaving the harijans to be wooed by the Christian missionaries, and the politics of patronage perfected by the Congress. Indeed caste-wise, it is the kamma gentry and peasantry that has shown a general preference for the left, especially the CPI(M); the fact that the one important reason for this partiality is the very patronage that the Congress has afforded the harijans is a shameful commentary on left politics, but is nevertheless an undeniable truth. The other important factor is that as regards the choice of leadership, the Congress has shown a general aversion towards according the leading role to coherent and well-organised landed communities settled in prosperous and fertile regions, and has preferred to give disproportionate importance to decrepit and unorganised sections of the gentry, or the economically powerful sections of the backward communities. This was the only viable policy for holding the immensely varied sections of this country's propertied classes together; for if the economically powerful communities had been allowed to acquire political leadership, that would have resulted in what our newspaper editors call 'fissiparous tendencies', to the fatal detriment of the unity of the ruling classes that is so essential for their survival. Indira Gandhi—perhaps more than her father—was an expert in handling this stratagem. But the incongruity inherent in such a tactic was not in line with the party's economics of the Green Revolution, which ensured more and more prosperity for precisely those who felt that they were being denied their fair share of political power. And their ranks were strengthened by the rise of new sections and a new generation enriched by the Green Revolution and all that it has entailed, both of whom have little loyalty and lots of impatience with the structure of the past. The Congress party's ambition to technologically modernise the country without suitably altering its political structure has now caught up with it, and it is paying for this folly all over the country through considerable bloodshed. With the rise of the TDP, this incongruous distance between the prosperous sections of the gentry and their newly rich fellow-travellers from the seats of political power has been bridged; albeit this implies a short-sighted self-assertion, which is inimical to what Rajiv Gandhi and his late mother liked to call 'national integrity' (which should be properly understood as the unity and integrity of the propertied classes), but that is not our concern right now.

What is of significance in the present context is that it implies the perpetration of more violence against the rural poor. It is a matter of historical accident (for these forces of arrogant self-assertion are present as much within the Congress as outside of it) that the violence takes the form of electoral conflict, with the landed classes backing the TDP and its allies (CPI, CPI[M], BJP, etc) and the harijans backing the Congress(I). It is small wonder then that the national opposition parties (we call them 'friendly opposition parties' in Andhra Pradesh) have been maintaining a shamefaced inactivity in the face of these assaults, while the Congress(I) is extracting maximum propaganda as the blood flows. Karamchedu is only the last of a series of incidents. The very first elections that brought the TDP to power in 1983 saw the burning of harijans at Padirikuppam in Chittoor district. Four persons were killed and about eighty houses gutted; property worth Rs 6 lakh was destroyed. In this year's Assembly elections, the assaults became more widespread, though less fatal. According to press reports, assaults took place on harijans at Muthukur, Veerareddypalem, Brahmanatangel and Vadamalapeta in Chittoor district; at Dharur, Chilapur and Alampalli in Rangareddy district; and at Venkatakrishnapuram and Cheemalamarri in Guntur district. As at Padirikuppam, the attacks took the form of house-burning. Harijan houses [*sic*] get burnt easily, especially in the summer months. Thirty houses were burnt and seventy-one persons were hospitalised, though mercifully no one died. Oddly enough, while we do not know how many of the landed classes were arrested, sixty harijans were taken into custody for rioting. And just in case somebody were to think that it is only the kamma gentry that has gained moral strength from the accession of NTR to power, let it be recorded that at Padirikuppam, the arsonists were naidus, and in the Rangareddy villages, they were reddys—which happen to be the dominant landed castes of the respective areas.

Now it is Karamchedu that is the site of the violence, and with an unprecedented degree of brutality. There was trouble in the village during the recent Assembly elections, with the harijans defying the landlords and voting for the Congress(I). That conflict merely added some more heat to the cauldron. On 16 July, there occurred an incident that set off the explosion. There are two drinking water tanks in the village, one for the harijans and the other for the caste-Hindus. At about four o'clock in the evening of 16 July, a kamma youth named Srinivasa Rao was feeding bran to his buffalo near the harijans' tank. Some of the bran dribbled down into

the tank. A madiga woman named Suvarta, who had come to fetch water, objected to it, and there was an altercation between the two. Srinivasa Rao took out the thickly plaited rope used for beating buffaloes, and beat Suvarta with it. The girl is said to have grabbed at the rope and beaten him in return. Some more people joined issue on both sides but the quarrel was soon settled. That night, however, the kamma youth came to Suvarta's house and dragged her out. But the neighbouring women interceded and sent away the youth. The harijans thought that the issue was closed, and, therefore, did not anticipate what would happen the next day.

That night, the kamma youth gathered at a brandy shop in the village and took a decision to attack the madigas (the other harijan caste, the malas, were deliberately spared). They mobilised their fellow-castemen from the neighbouring villages through openly communal and provocative slogans (such as 'If you are born to a kamma you come out, if you are born to a madiga, then don't'). A mob of 2,000 to 3,000 then gathered in tractors and on motorcycles, and surrounded the madiga houses from all sides. The surprised madigas ran for their lives. Some ran into houses, some hid under haystacks, while others ran into the fields. But their pursuers were unrelenting. They ransacked houses and hacked at the doors and walls with axes. Duddu Vandanam and Duddu Ramesh were caught running out of their houses, and were attacked with axes. Vandanam[5] died on the spot and Ramesh four days later in hospital. Those who ran into the fields including Tella Yevasu, Moshe and Muthaiah were chased and murdered there. The manner in which the 70-year-old Moshe was killed is illustrative of the gruesome massacre which took place that day. He first begged with them to spare him, as he was an old man. When they started beating him, he ran into the fields. They caught up with him, hacked him with an axe, and as he fell down on his back, they dug a spear into his groin and twisted it. Muthaiah and Yevasu were also beaten with sticks, axed and speared to death in a similar fashion. Duddu Yesu was another person who had been axed and died five days later in hospital, taking the death toll to six. About twenty others were hospitalised with severe injuries on the heads and limbs.

The women were treated equally brutally. They were dragged out of the houses, stripped and molested. Three young girls, Mariamma (11), Victoria (13) and Sulochana were raped; after raping them, the molesters dug sticks into their private parts and twisted them. Sulochana, who was married and pregnant, had an abortion in hospital. It is not certain if the girls survived.

[5] His mother Duddu Alisamma, who was an eyewitness to his death, was found dead under mysterious circumstances a year later on 13 August 1986.

It is only to be expected that politicians would make capital out of this brutality, especially considering that the chief minister's own people are probably involved in it. But in AP, the Congress(I) is the only party that can make such capital, for the other opposition parties are too much beholden to NTR for the measly number of seats they have in the assembly or parliament. They have, therefore, been content with making condemnatory statements. The Congress(I) appears to be on track to make a big issue of it. Legend has it that when a similar massacre took place in Belchi during the Janata Party's rule, Indira Gandhi rode into the village on an elephant to comfort the bereaved. This time, Vengala Rao, the local Congress(I) chief, was either unable to procure an elephant or realised that the heavy beast would find it difficult to navigate the muddy black soil of the cotton tracts in these monsoon months, and so chose a more modern mode of transport. Neither he nor his party is doing anything to help the refugees who have camped in the church at Chirala, but they are out to pull down the state government if they can.

A more realistic question is whether the guilty would be punished.[6] Of the estimated 3,000 assailants, merely eleven have so far been arrested. Most of those whom the victims have identified by name have vanished from the village. 'They might even have gone to London, for they are rich people,' says the equanimous superintendent of police of the district. Although 3,000 people could not have been armed with axes and spears spontaneously and simultaneously, he refuses to consider the possibility of a criminal conspiracy. If you press him further for stringent action, he says virtuously, 'What do you want me to do, gather all the thousands of kammas at the police station and beat them up?' We do not, indeed, but we do know what would have happened if it had been the other way around and the labourers had attacked the landlords and killed half this number. One shudders to think of what would have happened then.

[6] The guilty were punished twenty-three years after the incident by the Supreme Court. One person was sentenced to life and twenty-nine others to a term of three years' imprisonment on 19 December 2008.

NTR's Defeat in Victory

EPW, 5 April 1987

The press has hailed it as a repeat mandate for N.T. Rama Rao (NTR) but his party's victory in the recently concluded panchayat (upper tier) elections is not all that spectacular. As compared to the 1985 assembly polls, he has actually fallen short of maintaining his hold in terms of the percentage of posts won, while the Congress(I) has almost doubled its tally, partly at NTR's expense but mainly at the expense of the other opposition parties. Barring the CPI(M), and that too thanks to the party's alliance with NTR, all the others have come a cropper. The Congress(I) has done even better in the municipal elections, which were held simultaneously, winning more than half the 95 municipalities, including the Corporation of Vijayawada.

The differential percentages of votes are being calculated and comparative graphs drawn up by determined analysts who remain undaunted by the fact that their graphs have never been good for extrapolating in terms of future elections—about the only genuinely useful purpose a graph can serve, if you discount its intimidatory value for the uninitiated—but there are many other things worth analysing—like why NTR chose to restructure the panchayat system with a seemingly meaningless subdivision of the middle tier from panchayat blocks to much smaller panchayat mandals; why he chose to have direct rather than indirect elections to the posts of mandal presidents and zilla parishad chairmen; why, indeed, he at all chose to have elections right in the middle of a happy and unlikely-to-be-disturbed

full five-year assembly term; why he was denied victory precisely in the Krishna delta that nurtured his party in 1983; and finally, why the almost simultaneous restructuring of grassroots democratic structures in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have just about as much of a likeness as the Mad Hatter's raven and the writing desk.

NTR's wisdom has always been a dubious thing but he certainly has had intelligent advisers. And somebody must have made it clear to him quite early during his rule that political power just does *not* consist of getting to occupy the top seat, which is about all that he achieved with the massive victory he got in 1983. The seemingly tidal wave-like victory left behind it the foundations and pillars of the power structure—in the gram panchayats, the panchayat blocks, the zilla parishads, the town municipalities, and the three corporations of Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam and Vijayawada—intact in the hands of either the Congress or an ad hoc administration formed during Congress rule. Then there was the patel–patwari[1] duo in the villages—called by different names in different parts of the country but the base pillar of the state structure in rural India at least since the time of Feroz Tughlaq[2]—committed heart and soul to 'Congress culture', especially in Telangana and Rayalaseema.[3] And finally, there was the bureaucracy with its manifold links with the Congress party and its leaders at all levels from the state secretariat to the headquarters of the remotest tahsil. True, a part of this structure—especially in the Krishna and Godavari deltas—had defected to NTR's side in 1983 and had contributed to his victory but that was only a small part. And if NTR had any illusions that with the cash box in his tight fist, these antipathetic structures could cause him no harm, he was soon disabused of the illusion when the Non-Gazetted Officers (NGOs) of his government went on a strike immediately after he came to power in 1983. He crushed the strike with the ruthlessness of a novice and has had his hands full with the fight against these diverse leftovers of Congress rule ever since. He abolished the posts of patels and patwaris with a stroke of the pen, and was hailed for this significant anti-feudal measure by the two communist parties which were his allies then. As for the other dragon—the bureaucracy—NTR has had many inconclusive rounds of fencing with it. He is known to ill-treat

[1] The traditional village head and the one who maintains registers of land in the village.

[2] Prime minister Feroz Shah Tughlaq (1351–88) of the Tughlaq dynasty.

[3] Chittoor, Cuddapah, Kurnool and Anantapur districts constitute the Rayalaseema region, so named after the medieval king Srikrishnadevaraya. They are also known as 'Ceded Districts', as they were ceded to the British by the Nizam in 1800.

senior IAS officers who have neither the gumption nor the unity to get together and tell him where to lay off; and his relation of mutual hatred with the NGOs is a fact of administrative life in AP. When they went on a fifty-eight-day strike recently, he got their leaders arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) for using abusive language against him (he said as much to press reporters who asked why the Preventive Detention Act had to be used against middle class salaried employees), and got some of them terminated without an enquiry under Article 311(2)(b) of the Indian Constitution. But perhaps he now has cause to rue his rashness, for his enmity with the NGOs must certainly have contributed to his loss in the recent municipal elections.

Soon after coming to power in 1983, NTR initiated a long struggle to displace the Congress(I) from the zilla parishads and the municipalities. The mixed success he had in this endeavour convinced him of the need to go in for elections across the board; and he also seems to have realised that defeating the Congress is not just a matter of having elections to all the grassroots democratic institutions; it is necessary to shake the structure at some point in order to snap the thousands of threads that are built into it, thereby making way for his mandate. Having direct elections to the top posts would cut through some of the threads but more of a restructuring was felt to be necessary. The gram panchayats he could not tamper with and as for the zillas or districts, they are too much an inalienable part of our cultural topography to be disturbed and reorganised. He hit at the middle tier: the panchayat blocks were divided into smaller panchayat mandals, called mandal praja parishads, with each of them consisting of about twelve to fifteen villages, and the revenue talukas were also replaced by the revenue mandals to coincide with the panchayat mandals. The zilla parishads, for the sake of making the nomenclature rhyme with the mandal praja parishads, were renamed as zilla praja parishads. The ostensible reason for the structural change was to make the panchayat and revenue headquarters accessible to the people, as if the inaccessibility lay in distance and not in corruption, callousness and incomprehensible rules and procedures. Anyway, his party's recent victory in the elections to the posts of presidents of 1,058 mandals and twenty-one zilla praja parishads has put the seal of success on his schemes and that is what really counts.

However, all this activity in the grassroots democratic structures needs a second look. A major problem facing the Indian ruling class is the need to expand its base by accommodating aspiring sections of the propertied classes from below. The path of development pursued for the last four decades is usually described as a failure but it really depends upon what

one means by success and failure. It certainly has enriched a lot of people and raised hopes among many others. These 'others' may constitute only the 'middle class' in the meaningless empiricist classification that is commonly employed; but in politics, what matters is the position in the social structure and the power that results from it, rather than income directly. And while a landlord of a backward area may be economically no better off than an upper division clerk in the government (a cause of much self-lament), he has more power and aspiration for power than the clerk can ever have or aspire to.

The objective need to expand at the base and accommodate these aspirants has generated a lot of debate in recent times about the decentralisation of power, grassroots democracy, and so on. The proponents of these ideas may be entirely innocent of class partialities—though not all of them are—and may honestly believe that they are advocating decentralised democracy, gandhism or *bharatiya sanskriti* as against monolithic-bureaucratic-centralised-occidental structures. How they delude themselves is their affair, but what they are actually achieving is to provide room in the power structure for recently enriched sections of the propertied classes, especially in the villages.

However, there is no unique method of accommodation. One of the methods, and a rather extreme one at that, is to actually hand over a lot of administrative responsibility and finances to the advocates of decentralisation, as Hegde appears to have done in Karnataka.[4] The common run of democratic intellectuals are full of admiration for Hegde for this reform. The class-blindness that affects admirers of 'decentralisation' is remarkable, especially since many of them are perceptive critics when it comes to analysing other aspects of the system. Decentralisation of this type just means the accumulation of more power in the hands of more of the rural and small-town rich; while earlier they had to work to get their interests embedded into the structure of the state or national politics, now they can have more of their interests served and more directly. This is not an evil and may even check some forms of 'authoritarianism', to use a convenient term, but the one thing that it does imply is a greater likelihood of repression of the rural poor. Those who admire decentralisation of power

[4] Ramakrishna Hegde (1926–2004), leader of the Janata Party, as chief minister of Karnataka (1983–85 and 1985–88) enacted a law that would devolve administrative powers to a three-tiered panchayati raj system. A wide range of financial and administrative powers were decentralised. When Balagopal wrote this piece, the experiment was still in its early stages.

should realise that there is no getting away from this reality in the given structural context. Ask any agricultural labourer or poor peasant and he will tell you better than any gandhian what it means if his landlord actually and directly controls the administrative and financial structures of 'rural development'. The cooperative movement has already given enough indication of what this means.

NTR chose the other method, which does not even have the merit of honesty: of creating several foci of power—like the 1,000-odd panchayat mandals—so that more people may aspire for positions of power; ensuring that they are elected directly by the electorate so that they are spared the insecurity of no-confidence motions and other such headaches; but keeping the decision-making authority and finances strictly away from them. What this situation of 'power minus finances and decision-making' means is best described as 'broker's power'. As it is, especially since NTR came to power, this is all the power that everybody from the gram panchayat sarpanches to MLAs have had, and this is the only power that NTR wishes to delegate. All decisions are taken by the state government or by bureaucratic bodies, and the finances are handled exclusively by the chief minister; the elected representatives of the people are thus merely go-betweens who run from their constituents to the government, though they no doubt make some money in the process. In fact, even this is rather tortuous: the people's representatives often do not even approach the decision-makers directly. All significant requests have to be routed through the TDP, especially the chief minister's youngest son-in-law, Chandrababu Naidu, an able and hard-working political operator, who was once upon a time a Congressman and is now the general secretary of his father-in-law's party.

The fact that this complex of structural and political factors lay behind the elections must have been apparent to the seasoned Congress leaders. When the patel and patwari posts were abolished, the Congressmen did not dare protest though they must have smarted at the sudden loss of their support base in the villages. They realised that the changes in the panchayat and revenue structure would upset the web of links that they had carefully built and nurtured over the decades, and, therefore, they reacted angrily, though once again the apparent 'democratisation' resulting from the changes stumped them. Their only real option was to participate actively in the elections and see what they could salvage from the wreck. This they did, heart and soul. One indication of their seriousness is the number of prominent leaders who contested for election to the chairman's posts in the zilla parishads: a notorious liquor contractor in West Godavari, an authentic warlord in Nalgonda and in 'communist' Khammam, known from the days of the Telangana uprising, the very son of Vengal Rao,[5] the union industries minister, Pradesh Congress Committee(I) president, and a vicious anti-communist. The Congress(I)'s candidates for the chairman's posts in the West Godavari, Krishna, Nalgonda, Khammam and Kurnool districts would be normally regarded as good enough for cabinet posts.

It must be acknowledged that all things—especially its own debasement—considered, the Congress(I) performed well. While the TDP won 632 of the 1,058 mandal presidents' posts and eighteen of the twenty-one zilla parishad chairmen's posts, the Congress(I) won 338 mandal presidents' posts and the remaining 3 zilla parishad chairmen's posts, including those in the Krishna and Guntur districts, which are the most politically aware in the bourgeois sense, that is to say, the most electorally conscious (in the sense that here one can discuss electoral politics with anyone in the streets and obtain a firm opinion as to who is allied with whom, why, since when and for how long). A better measure of the success of the Congress is that 338 out of a total of 1,058 seats signify 31 per cent of the total whereas their seats in the assembly constitute only about 16 per cent of the total. More satisfying for them, however, must be their victory in the majority of the municipal councils including the Corporation of Vijayawada.

In keeping with the structural and political importance of the elections, they were characterised by extensive verbal violence and widespread physical violence. And in keeping with the irrelevance of the electoral process to the purported purpose of governance, no issues of public importance were involved either in the electioneering or in the voting. The occurrence of a severe and recurrent drought is perhaps the major problem facing the state right now, followed by police lawlessness as a close second. But neither the campaigners nor those who voted for them appear to have felt that electioneering in a representative democracy must have something to do with, or at least say anything about, these things. The reason why election forecasts based on solid reasoning normally go wrong is that those who make the forecasts never vote, and in lieu of participation in what they are analysing, they base their analysis on the received ideology, which says that people elect representatives who are fit to solve their problems. It is by now well recognised that the representatives themselves do not believe in this theory; it is time to realise that the people—barring perhaps schoolteachers for whom it is an occupational conviction—too perceive no real connection between elections and responsible governance; or at least no more than there is between the habitual celebration of the harvest

[5] Vengal Rao was chief minister of AP, 1973–78.

festival of *sankranti* and the actual business of harvesting in a state that is experiencing the 'Green Revolution' in only about 10 per cent of its area and the drought in the rest. Or even between the recently imported celebration of the North Indian festival of Holi and the invocation of spring, which is less a season than a figure of speech in South India.

But violence there was, and a fair amount too. At least seven persons died in clashes and there were large-scale incidents of booth capturing, ballot snatching, and use of explosives and firearms, especially in the Krishna, Guntur, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Khammam and Godavari districts. Many of the candidates, especially in the Rayalaseema districts where the illicit manufacture of explosives is a household industry, were listed as rowdy history-sheeters in police records. The TDP government got some Congress leaders of Kurnool arrested during the electioneering under the Anti-Goonda Act, NTR's own Preventive Detention Act, which is meant for prevention of bootlegging, prostitution and such unseemly activities. The high court, which probably would not have minded if they had used the more decent National Security Act, found this a little too shocking and quashed the detentions. In retaliation, Vengal Rao threatened to have the houses of TDP leaders raided by tax officials.

Parallel to this physical violence was the unprecedented trading of choice abuses, not by the ordinary cadres, but by NTR and his ministers, on one side, and Vengal Rao, on the other. The TDP's general secretary even appealed through the press to prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to stop Vengal Rao from using foul language. The rapid proliferation of Telugu dailies, which have nothing better to report than this slanging match, has egged them on; the party functionaries abuse their opponents roundly one day in an election meeting that is attended perhaps by 100 people, and next morning joyfully watch all their abuse dutifully printed by at least four newspapers that together reach nearly 10 lakh gross subscribers, which probably implies at least 30 lakh gross readers and perhaps 20 lakh net readers. The absolute vulgarisation of politics, which makes no pretence of issuing manifestos and debating programmes, is ably matched by an equally vulgarised press.

Formally, NTR has won; a closer look, however, shows that what he has lost is equally significant, perhaps not in terms of numbers but in terms of location. The loss in the municipal elections indicates an accentuation by misgovernance of the normal phenomenon that urban voters, who receive more information, generally tend to vote against the party in power. A more significant loss is in the Krishna and Guntur districts. It was the highly class-conscious gentry of the Krishna delta that planned and created NTR; it was also they who were disillusioned first when he turned out to be much less efficient than they expected him to be in serving their interests. They now dream wistfully of the Hegde or the Jyoti Basu[6] that might have been. Meanwhile, however, their creation has caught the fancy of the rest of the state and they watch helplessly as their party (the TDP) runs through the electorate of distant Adilabad wherein neither the marwari traders in the towns nor the Gondi- and Marathi-speaking tribals in the forests understand even one sentence of the language and sentiments of NTR's speeches.

[6] Jyoti Basu (1914–2010), a CPI(M) leader, was chief minister of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000, which made him the longest serving chief minister of any state in India.

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But violence there was, and a fair amount too. At least seven persons died in clashes and there were large-scale incidents of booth capturing, ballot snatching, and use of explosives and firearms, especially in the Krishna, Guntur, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Khammam and Godavari districts. Many of the candidates, especially in the Rayalaseema districts where the illicit manufacture of explosives is a household industry, were listed as rowdy history-sheeters in police records. The TDP government got some Congress leaders of Kurnool arrested during the electioneering under the Anti-Goonda Act, NTR's own Preventive Detention Act, which is meant for prevention of bootlegging, prostitution and such unseemly activities. The high court, which probably would not have minded if they had used the more decent National Security Act, found this a little too shocking and quashed the detentions. In retaliation, Vengal Rao threatened to have the houses of TDP leaders raided by tax officials.

Parallel to this physical violence was the unprecedented trading of choice abuses, not by the ordinary cadres, but by NTR and his ministers, on one side, and Vengal Rao, on the other. The TDP's general secretary even appealed through the press to prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to stop Vengal Rao from using foul language. The rapid proliferation of Telugu dailies, which have nothing better to report than this slanging match, has egged them on; the party functionaries abuse their opponents roundly one day in an election meeting that is attended perhaps by 100 people, and next morning joyfully watch all their abuse dutifully printed by at least four newspapers that together reach nearly 10 lakh gross subscribers, which probably implies at least 30 lakh gross readers and perhaps 20 lakh net readers. The absolute vulgarisation of politics, which makes no pretence of issuing manifestos and debating programmes, is ably matched by an equally vulgarised press.

Formally, NTR has won; a closer look, however, shows that what he has lost is equally significant, perhaps not in terms of numbers but in terms of location. The loss in the municipal elections indicates an accentuation by misgovernance of the normal phenomenon that urban voters, who receive more information, generally tend to vote against the party in power. A more significant loss is in the Krishna and Guntur districts. It was the highly class-conscious gentry of the Krishna delta that planned and created NTR; it was also they who were disillusioned first when he turned out to be much less efficient than they expected him to be in serving their interests. They now dream wistfully of the Hegde or the Jyoti Basu[6] that might have been. Meanwhile, however, their creation has caught the fancy of the rest of the state and they watch helplessly as their party (the TDP) runs through the electorate of distant Adilabad wherein neither the marwari traders in the towns nor the Gondi- and Marathi-speaking tribals in the forests understand even one sentence of the language and sentiments of NTR's speeches.

[6] Jyoti Basu (1914–2010), a CPI(M) leader, was chief minister of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000, which made him the longest serving chief minister of any state in India.

Censorship by Force

A 'Telugu' Prescription for the 'Yellow' Virus

EPW, 27 June 1987

About a year and a half ago, what is called 'Indian Public Opinion' was taken aback when it came to know that N.T. Rama Rao (NTR)—who then led and even now leads the parliamentary opposition to the Congress(I)'s authoritarianism at the head of a thin and progressively decimated phalanx of unsuccessful and suitably humble leaders—had devised a Press Bill for Andhra Pradesh which copies verbatim the notorious Bihar Press Bill,[1] the most authoritarian thing that the Congress ever tried to impose upon the people of India. There were condemnatory articles in the press, shocked letters to the editors, snide remarks from unsuccessful rivals of the opposition, sententious editorials in the dailies—and nobody took seriously NTR's straight-faced protestation that he intended to use the legislation only against the 'yellow' press. Their arguments, of course, were weighty and serious but to NTR, the whole thing must have seemed terribly unjust. Why a man cannot use a little bit of the power he has taken so much trouble to acquire, especially for such a noble cause as fighting

[1] It was passed by the Bihar Assembly on 31 July 1982 when Jagannath Misra was chief minister. The bill made it a criminal offence to publish, sell or possess any printed matter whose content is 'grossly indecent' or 'scurrilous'. Offenders could be arrested without a warrant, held without bail and tried by an executive magistrate. Upon conviction, they could be imprisoned for up to two years. Considered obnoxious, the bill led to an uproar across the country.

scurrilous journalism, without every other person who cannot get elected even to a municipal council preaching democracy at him, must have been more than he could fathom. NTR's logic has always been that a person's democratic credentials are measured by the number of votes s/he can poll, and, therefore, there is nobody more democratic anywhere and at any time in a parliamentary democracy than whoever is at that time in power; in the case in point, himself. He, it is true, did not devise this dialectic for it was used before him by others, like Indira Gandhi for instance, but in his case, it sums up comprehensively the meaning of democracy, and forms the solid foundation of his arrogance. Whether this perspective on democracy qualifies him for being counted among—leave alone at the head of—the left and democratic forces is a separate question altogether.

Public opinion, however unjust, is public opinion nonetheless and NTR therefore shelved the Press Bill. No doubt, not entirely by accident, the shelving of the bill coincided almost exactly with the brutal murder in Vijayawada of 29-year-old Pingali Dasaratharam,[2] editor of the most successful 'yellow' venture. He was stabbed repeatedly with a knife on the evening of 21 October 1985. Murder, of course, is a well-known short-circuit for repressive legislation, though sometimes, like with any short-circuit, the perpetrator is liable to inflict some self-damage too. In this case, however, neither NTR nor his home minister, whose involvement in the killing was alleged by the dead man's mother, got hurt. The police instead hit a second bird with the same stone by arresting two ex-associates of Dasaratharam—by that time the editor and assistant editor of a rival publication—for his murder; they attributed the crime to rivalry, and have only this week charge-sheeted them.

It was generally expected by those who regard themselves as knowledgeable in these matters that this murder of one editor and the murder charge on a couple of others would put an end to the 'yellow' rags. The supposition was based on the assumption that scruples, convictions and courage go together and as the publishers of these magazines lack the first two, they obviously cannot possess the last. Those who arrived at this supposition erred, perhaps, in not realising that profitability can well substitute for convictions in generating the courage required to withstand such violence; and the 'yellow' press continues to flourish.

The publications purportedly part of the 'yellow' press circulate widely and are very profitable. Indeed, they circulate so widely that it is doubtful that they can legitimately be called 'yellow', for that description carries

[2] Editor of the weekly magazine *Encounter*, published from Vijayawada.

overtones of clandestine circulation and a shamefaced clientele, neither of which applies to the 'yellow' press of Andhra Pradesh. Their contents, needless to add, are offensive in every sense of the term: in bad taste, obscene, untruthful at least by half, and full of vulgar innuendo and suggestive phrases. Any attempt to seriously analyse their contents is bound to severely tax even moderately squeamish sensibilities. The general scheme of any item in these publications is that the reporter picks up a juicy bit of information—regardless of whether s/he can prove it or not—from the lives and activities of public personalities: politicians, film stars, businessmen and high-profile administrators; adds a lot of unspecific and preferably lascivious rumours to it, and writes down the combination in deliberately overstated, obscene and offensive language. For instance, a news item about a Congress leader trying to get a Telugu Desam Party (TDP) ticket would run somewhat like this, 'That well-known eunuch who pimped faithfully for the Nehru family all these years now wants to get into the brothel house at Hyderabad by licking NTR's behind.'

During the last five to six years, about two dozen such periodicals have come up in the state; they give themselves fantastic names like *Encounter, Commando, Caligula, Blood Hound, Nuisance,* etc (for some reason they are mostly christened in English). Dasaratharam was editor of *Encounter* and those accused of his murder are the editor and assistant editor, respectively, of *Political Encounter.* Printed on cheap newsprint and incurring perhaps no expenditure other than the payment of meagre salaries to the staff, they are profitable ventures, and are worth all the tribulations that their publishers may have to undergo once in a while, including an odd murder or murder rap.

Where do they derive their readership from? Indeed, the question is coterminous with the equally mysterious popularity of Telugu films, for in recent times, the latter too have been equally offensive—not just obscene but offensive across the board. And taken together, the periodicals and the films constitute a major phenomenon—a mix of unethical profit-hunting, vicarious and collective exhibitionism, self-expression of popular anger, diversionary ideological offensive by the state and ruling classes, institutionalised provision of a 'safe' catharsis to social frustration, and effective acculturation in anti-democratic values by titillating packaging—that it would be a most exciting topic for sociological investigation, if any genuine teaching or research in sociology were being undertaken in our universities. As it is, one can only grope for an answer. And to arrive at the answer, the first step is to get rid of middle class/upper caste values, whose instinctive reaction is to reach for the Indian Penal Code (IPC), that is to say, dub the whole lot obscene under Section 292 of the IPC and arrest the publishers. But given the wide and unabashed readership they command and the common sense logic that it makes no sense to call lakhs of people obscene, it is necessary to search for the roots of this mass obscenity.

The roots of the obscenity lie in the following facts: (i) though the overall literacy rate is increasing painfully slowly, the more than 2 per cent growth rate of population implies a substantial increase in the volume of literates, many of whom, for want of anything better to do, are acquiring more learning than they would have in better circumstances; like all newly literate people—partly because they are mostly young—they have a fascination for printed information and comprise a good market for anyone who cares to cater to them; (ii) these newly literate and educated sections live and work (or do not work) in conditions whereby, on the one hand, they are not given to puritanical squeamishness, and on the other, they bear the brunt of the ruling class oppression and especially because they are mostly young, are much more uninhibited in their expression of anger than even the theoretically most 'extreme' intellectual with his jaded radicalism, secure living quarters and sanitised university job; (iii) they belong to a culture which, unlike the intellectual's positivist rationalism, does not regard a piece of information as unauthentic merely because it has not been reduced to bare numbers; the statement, 'that well-known eunuch who pimped faithfully for the Nehru family, etc, etc', makes as much sense to them as the following alternative: 'Mr X, who was with the Congress party between 1964 and 1986, and resigned in the latter year, is now trying for a Telugu Desam ticket in the forthcoming Assembly elections'; (iv) and finally—and this time on the objective side of the argument—the public and private lives of our 'public' figures have reached such depths of corruption and depravity that sanitised reporting cannot really do justice to them; even at such an august level as the Fairfax and Bofors[3] affairs, can one honestly say that the matters are most aptly captured by the polite and polished prose that our English press puts on? To put it bluntly, the 'yellow' press merely reflects a very 'yellow' public life.

Perhaps the first person to consciously recognise the emergence of this potential market of neo-literates was Ramoji Rao, industrialist (if fruit drinks and bottled pickles can be called industries), advertiser, financier, hotelier, publisher and currently filmmaker. He started the daily *Eenadu* in

[3] It refers to a scandal of alleged kickbacks paid to former Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, by the Swedish firm Bofors for selling Howitzer guns to India. Fairfax was the American detective agency hired by Rajiv Gandhi's finance minister V.P. Singh to investigate the accounts of non-resident Indians (NRIs) and for taking up the Bofors pay-offs case.

the 1970s, and it has gone on to become the largest circulated Telugu daily. Since it is a newspaper and caters for both the traditional middle class as well as the newly literate sections, it could not take full advantage of all the possibilities opened up by the emergence of the new market. But the daily is uncompromising in not distinguishing between facts, rumours, wishes, suggestions and innuendo. It has used this suppleness very effectively in building up NTR, bringing him to power in 1983, and keeping him there. Subsequently, all the Telugu dailies have taken to this style of reporting, with the paradoxical effect of perhaps stabilising the circulation of the English dailies, which stick to more traditional ways of reporting and are, therefore, found to be more congenial in content by the traditional middle class.

However, as mentioned above, the compulsions of a daily newspaper make it impossible for even the altered Telugu press to fill in the newly created void. Film journals did it for a while, but it was the arrival of the 'yellow' press that really satisfied this hunger. And here it is the late Dasaratharam who must be credited with possessing the genius of a pioneer. With Dasaratharam it became a common sight to find lower middle class first-generation-literate youth going around with a garish copy of a 'yellow' periodical in one hand. Like most people who initiate 'bad' things, he himself appears to have been a good and honest man. He came from a poor brahmin background and had given up his studies in high school. It was with honest anger and a naturally abusive style of expression that he began his periodical *Encounter.* If one makes due allowance for the lack of the value of sanitisation of information and the lack of squeamishness born of poverty, then there was much that was authentic and hurting to the rulers in what he wrote. And the fact that his readers believed in his integrity is proved by the widespread sympathy that his murder evoked. His imitators, who came later, however, are mostly more professional 'yellow' scribes, with some of them probably being even blackmailers. It was Dasaratharam's *Encounter* that ostensibly occasioned NTR's Press Bill and the failure to get it passed was avenged with his murder.

As an aside, the democratic forces face the genuine challenge as to how they should deal with the phenomenon of 'yellow' journalism. To dismiss it as 'yellow' is to miss the point that it is *not* a fringe phenomenon: as noted earlier, the periodicals are not bought, sold and read clandestinely. The whole affair is very open and the readers do not appear to be conscious of indulging in anything unseemly. How the readership can be weaned away from this virus is a genuine problem. The problem came up with films and film songs but wherever the communists have been active—especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) [CPI(ML)] groups in recent times—their cultural troupes have at least locally made an impact that meets the challenge of the films head-on. But it is in the sphere of the written word that the progressive cultural movement remains a fringe phenomenon and usually too musty and boring to be called avant-garde. To cover up for this failure by calling the 'yellow' press 'lumpen' is to play into the hands of the ruling class, which can also use that description for genuine mass journalism.

This brings us to the denouement of the story—or at least of the first act. If the Press Bill could not be enacted, and the murder of one 'yellow' editor plus a murder charge on another two could not put a stop to the encumbrance, the rulers had to—and did—think of a third way. That was to stop the sale of the publications. In the two major coastal towns of Guntur and Vijayawada in the state, the police swooped down upon the sellers of the publications and arrested them under Section 292 of the IPC. In Vijayawada, the arrests were made on 22, 24 and 25 March 1987, and in Guntur on 3 April 1987. The advantage that the police had was that though the sellers are large in number, they are mostly men involved in petty trades like paan, bidi, cigarette and soda shopkeepers. They could be conveniently detained in lockup and threatened. There are, however, two things to note about the timing of the arrests: one, that they took place just after the completion of the mandal elections, as if the police were waiting for the elections to be over before taking action; two, the arrests were preceded by the publication in the 3 February issue of one of the magazines, *Political Encounter,* of a story in which the superintendent of police, Vijayawada (urban police district), was accused of collecting huge bribes from liquor shops and bars as a consideration for not raiding them, and was further described quite pointlessly as a eunuch.

However, the arrests and cases would obviously not be enough; Section 292 is a bailable offence and the shopkeepers had to be given bail and let off immediately. The trial would take a year or two, and moreover, the prosecution perhaps would not be stupid enough to insist that the writings be recognised as obscene and the paanwallahs punished for selling them; for Section 292 covers not only the sale of obscene publications but also the exhibition of obscene posters, including film posters. Since film producers, distributors and exhibitors are among the most important personages in the provincial ruling class of Andhra Pradesh, no prosecutor would miss the imprudence of asking the courts to set a precedent that could inconvenience them.

In any case, all this would take too long and would be too cumbersome

for the police of this state who believe in—and are honoured for—instant results. So the police, under the leadership of the superintendent of police, Vijayawada, who was personally affected, supplied the paanwallahs with a list of twenty 'yellow' publications and told them plainly and bluntly that—law or no law, freedom or no freedom—they would not sell these publications henceforth. The Guntur Town Paan Bidi Cigarette and Soda Sellers' Welfare Association (such a thing actually exists) asked the police in real anger whether the prohibition was legal; they probably have not heard of Article 19(1)(g) of the Indian Constitution, but their traders' instinct must have told them that business is a universal right, Constitution or no Constitution. They also appealed to their apex body, the AP Paanwallahs' Association to intervene in the matter and safeguard their right to sell the publications. The executive committee of that association, however, met in an emergency session in Vijayawada on 5 April 1987, and even after quoting the Guntur Town Association's appeal at length and apparently in appreciation, went on to resolve instead that the paanwallahs of the state would henceforth desist from selling the publications listed by the police.

However, a resolution is only a resolution, and a paanwallah presumably does not lose much by being expelled from the association for violating it, and the periodicals continue to sell fitfully. If this unforeseen hurdle has stumped the police, they are yet to show it.

Congress(I) vs Telugu Desam Party

EPW, 10 October 1987

Judicial activism, hailed by a few, maligned by another few, and justly ignored by the rest, has spawned strange progeny. The strangest of them, perhaps, is a writ petition right now lying with the High Court of Andhra Pradesh. Filed by a Congress(I) leader, it asks the court to issue a writ of *quo warranto*[1] to the chief minister, N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), questioning his right to continue in office, and a writ of *mandamus*[2] to the central government directing it to impose president's rule in the state.

The petition is an interesting document and it reveals quite a few things on the very surface. It reveals the frustration of the Congress leaders at the injustice of the usurpation of their place by a man whose appetite for power, money and aggrandisement is no less than that of any Congressman; whose unprincipled cynicism, nepotism, ruthlessness and corruption are a match for their own; who does everything that any Congressman ever did but only more thoroughly and with even less compunction, if that is at all possible; and who, notwithstanding all this, gets counted among the

[1] It is one of the five constitutional remedies offered to citizens under Article 32. It is a proceeding whereby the court enquires into the legality of the claim which someone asserts to a public office, and to oust him or her from its enjoyment if the claim is not well founded.
[2] This writ commands a party to perform some public or quasi-public legal duty, which he or she refused to perform and performance of which cannot be enforced by any other adequate legal remedy.

prominent representatives of the democratic forces in the country. More than anything else, it reveals the Congressmen's frustration at their inability to do anything about it. They have tried everything. They have contested elections and tried to get votes, only to discover that NTR could get more; they have tried to throw bombs and capture booths, only to discover that NTR could throw more bombs and capture more booths; they have tried to buy NTR's MLAs, only to discover that he could buy back all of them and then some. Finally, they have now come to the court. The ritual submission that the petitioner has tried every other remedy and failed to obtain justice has a sadly authentic ring this time.

However, this is only what the surface reveals. A deeper look at the petitioner's contentions reveals much more about the politics and the fractional conflicts of the ruling classes. And it is worthwhile to take a deeper look at the contentions.

The principal contentions of the petition against NTR are: (i) commission of criminal offences like violation of the income tax and wealth tax laws, urban land ceiling regulations, Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), etc; (ii) corruption, misuse of power, and misappropriation of public funds for personal ends; (iii) casteism, nepotism and favouritism, especially the filling up of all official nominations with persons close to the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), and persons belonging to the chief minister's caste; (iv) police atrocities and atrocities against harijans; (v) disrespect towards the courts; and (vi) disrespect towards the Constitution, as indicated by the anti-centre tirades of NTR. Some of the substantiating details of the allegations give us the kind of information that would be very difficult for the common citizen of this state to get hold of otherwise. The petitioner coyly describes his occupation as 'agriculture', but that pursuit occupies him, if at all, only *in absentia*. He is an experienced Congress leader of Visakhapatnam,[3] and is currently one of the secretaries of the state Congress(I) committee, being in charge of the organisation of the party in the coastal districts. His access to information *cannot* be matched by you and me.

Perhaps the most startling is the information on NTR's violation of ceiling laws and tax laws. It is generally known that NTR is an uncommonly rich man, perhaps one of the richest men in the country in the pre-corporate tradition, and that much more of his wealth is held in 'black' than in white. Even his admirers admit that he is worth at least Rs 200 crore. Much of it is in the form of real estate—urban land, cinema studios, cinema halls and other buildings. This petition puts the value of his real estate holdings alone in Madras and Hyderabad cities at Rs 250 crore. The extent of his landholding in Hyderabad is stated as 125,000 square metres, worth Rs 35 crore. This excludes an extent of about 70,000 square metres acquired by him after coming to power, for the purpose of constructing residences for himself as chief minister. In his wealth tax returns, all this land is undervalued to such an extent that 'it does not even reflect a fraction of the market value'. When the press people questioned NTR about this matter after the filing of this petition, he is reported to have admitted that according to returns filed by him and his sons, they do possess about 90,000 square metres of urban land in Hyderabad, that is to say, about 75 per cent of the extent alleged in the petition.

After taking over as chief minister, NTR has been nonchalantly acquiring more and more land. The way in which he has misused power for this purpose is classic, and shows unusual precocity in a man who has barely begun to cut his teeth in politics. Here are two instances from this petition. Soon after coming to power, NTR started putting on ochre robes, earrings of vaguely tantrik significance, a *rudrakshamala* around his throat, and two varieties of pious marks on his forehead, the Shaivite *vibhuti* and the non-sectarian red spot (whose origin perhaps goes back to blood sacrifices to an iconic image). Donning this eclectic apparel, he started describing himself alternately as a *sanyasi* and a *rajarshi*. Now, while Hindu dharma allows a *rishi*, who is a *sthita-prajna*, to be a raja in times of dire need, whether it also allows a mere sanyasi to be one is a doubtful point; and whether a man who belongs to what Manu and Baudhayana would have identified as a sudra caste can at all be any of these is an even more moot point. However, what NTR did not doubt for a moment was that as a rishi, he deserved to have a secluded cottage for himself somewhere outside the city, and as a raja, he deserved to have it financed from public funds. He first got four acres of land owned by someone near the industrial area of Nacharam exempted from the Urban Land Ceiling Act and then bought that land to join seven acres of adjoining land owned by a son of his, and made a compact plot of eleven acres. He then got a cottage constructed for himself in this plot. As that was to be the chief minister's residence, the various government departments—electricity, roads and buildings and telephones—immediately put up all the requisite infrastructure at public expense. NTR waited for that to be done and then converted the plot into 'Ramakrishna Horticultural Studios', allegedly meant for growing orchards for the purpose of shooting film duets, got the land exempted from ceiling laws (and allegedly transferred an honest IAS officer who refused to give

[3] Dronamraju Satyanarayana (1933–2005), a senior Congressman and close associate of former prime ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

the exemption for the entire land), and having thus grabbed eleven acres mostly at public expense, went back to live in his official residence at Abid's Road in the heart of the city. He then repeated the same game at Gandipet, another suburb, where he built an ashram for himself, got electricity, roads, fencing, etc, at public expense, and then converted it into the state headquarters of his party. He now stays in the city but keeps shuttling between the city and the Gandipet party headquarters, with the public again paying for all this shuttling back and forth accompanied by the enormous security apparatus that has become a must for all political leaders in India these days. There are several other instances of land-grabbing alleged by this petitioner and the general public: getting exemption under the Urban Land Ceiling Act for a film studio but actually using the land for a shopping complex; forcing the Hyderabad Urban Development Authority and through it the Hyderabad Agricultural Marketing Society to purchase a private party's land at a price that was five times the market rate (in the process allegedly transferring two more uncooperative IAS officers), in return for that gentleman gifting NTR's relatives with 300 acres of land elsewhere in the state; and so on. NTR is an outstanding personality in many respects but in no respect does he stand out conspicuously, as much as he does in land-grabbing. And in the Congressman's plea for justice, there is more of envy and chagrin than righteousness, since not even the ablest land-grabber among the Congressmen can hope to equal NTR's record.

When the petitioner turns to tax violations, he is caught in a cruel dilemma. It was his party that introduced the voluntary disclosure schemes under the Income Tax and Wealth Tax Acts. It was undoubtedly meant for the convenience of all members of the ruling class, overburdened as they all are with ill-gotten wealth. Yet, when NTR is learnt to have made a disclosure, in 1985, that he had understated his personal income by Rs 7.5 lakh and his wealth by Rs 50 lakh, the petitioner was aghast at the immorality of the whole thing, that a chief minister of a state can 'disclose' voluntarily that he has been telling lies all these days and has now decided to come out with the truth since the liability attached to it has been removed. The petitioner's dilemma here is truly tragic: 'It is clear that Sri N.T. Rama Rao is . . . a self-confessed criminal though not punishable, in view of the special nature of the scheme and the immunity conferred thereon'; but, he reassures himself and the court, while the immunity may save him from prosecution, 'it cannot cure the criminality of the person'. Having delivered this unctuous curse, he goes on to add that much prior to the disclosure, in fact, before NTR had become the chief minister, a move had been initiated in December 1982 by the government to proceed against him for tax evasion, but with NTR forming a party and coming to power in 1983, the government of India has avoided prosecution because 'for political reasons [it] is afraid of moving in the matter'. He adds the juicy tidbit that he 'reliably understands' that when the matter went up to Vishwanath Pratap Singh, then union finance minister, in 1985, the latter commented that it was 'a clear case of wilful concealment', and yet no prosecution resulted.

Let us leave the Congressman to his hypocrisy and examine the allegations for their political meaning. It is not very relevant whether NTR, as a person, is more corrupt or more aggressively corrupt, than the Congress leaders. The phenomenon that came up as the TDP could easily have expressed itself as a faction within the Congress party. What is relevant is the material essence of the phenomenon, and how that is reflected in this multimillionaire tycoon, who goes on ingesting more and more, that NTR not only represents but is *of* a class; he is an 'organic' leader of the propertied classes, a type that is possible in the modern world only in an incompletely bourgeoisified society like ours, with the separation of civil and political societies being correspondingly incomplete. The class he belongs to is a rural–provincial class that has been one of the principal beneficiaries of the last four decades of development. This class originated in landholding and has interests in agriculture and agro-based trade and small industry, in addition to quarrying, contracts, trade, finance and the tertiary sector, in general. It is a new-rich class, and like any new-rich class, it is ruthless and aggressive in its accumulation of property and wealth. It is raising its head all over the country and giving a lot of trouble to the 'monopoly capitalists', using the idiom of the peasantry, an idiom that gains verisimilitude from its ability to gather the richer sections of the peasantry behind it. Its culture has the general characteristics of the new rich: it is loud, vulgar and bereft of human values.

This culture is best seen in Telugu films, which are made, financed and exhibited by this class. It was these films that made NTR, the man and his wealth, and it was from here that he was picked up by the godfathers of his class to lead it in its drive for more power and for a greater realignment of the economy in its favour. His personal corruption merely reflects his social base and political role. The vulgar aggrandisement typical of his class is perhaps more aptly captured by the details given in this petition about the expense incurred by the public for furnishing this man's residence: a total of Rs 7.32 lakh between March 1983 and the end of 1984, consisting of Rs 53,000 for electrical fittings, Rs 48,000 for partitions, Rs 18,000 for toilets, Rs 8,000 for crockery, Rs 10,000 for a dining table, Rs 20,000

for 'additional' electrical fittings, Rs 8,000 for barbed wire fencing, Rs 13,000 for door frames, Rs 9,000 for water heating arrangements, Rs 45,000 for painting the walls, Rs 4,000 for cloth for door curtains, and another Rs 4,000 for napkins and cutlery. The point is not that a Congress leader would have spent less, the point is really not about individuals or parties.

The next major charge against NTR, that of casteism, must equally be understood against the background of the fractional conflicts of the propertied classes. The plaintive tone of the Congressmen in this matter is just the frustration of the *mansabdars*, who have lost out in this round of distribution of *jagirs* because a new party of favourites has come up at the Padshah's court. From the time of the Delhi Sultanate and its *iqtas*, it has been a characteristic of Indian feudalism that a sizeable chunk of the ruling class lives by sponging upon the state, which collects most of the surplus product as revenue. That character has continued down to this day, though naturally in a changed context. The context is officially described as a socialistic pattern of society, welfarism or the mixed economy. What it means is that a significant part of the society's surplus gravitates to the state, no longer as land revenue but mainly as indirect taxes and created money; and the propertied classes share this wealth among each other in a variety of ways. Some of them take it as straight cash, much like the *mansab*[4] holders of Mughal times, while others take it in more complex forms like infrastructural investment, concessions, subsidies and cheap loan capital. The latter form of sharing is not very visible and easily passes for 'development' but the former is glaringly visible and gets periodically flogged by a strange combination of critics: those who are left out in the sharing, and those who are addicted to either liberal economic theory or unctuous political morality.

Charges of nepotism and casteism levelled by the Congressmen against NTR are essentially the plaints of aspiring sharers left out in the sharing. When the petitioner complains that 'all political plums are given to the kammas', and that 'the reddy community is persecuted and harassed', one can either take the complaint at face value, or read into it the anguish of the gentry of the Telangana, Rayalaseema, and the non-delta coastal districts, who feel deprived at the expense of their rivals of the Krishna delta; or, more generally, the frustration of the class fractions that had

[4] Literally means rank. Mansabadars were rank holders in the Mughal army, who were granted land which they did not own but could use its revenue for the maintenance of an army.

gathered around the Congress and who now feel that the ground is being pulled from under their feet by their rival fractions that have created or gathered around the TDP. The fact that such complex class or fractional conflict is perceived in terms of caste has less to do with the empirical veracity of the allegations than with the *political* need to rouse the 'rabble' of one's caste against a rival fraction, that is to say, when TDP rule is described by the Congress as kamma rule, it is more important to examine the political need and the sociological possibility of the description than to take a caste-count of ministers and holders of nominated offices. When the petitioner, who does take a caste-count of the nominations to the dozens of boards, committees, corporations, societies, councils, trusts, agencies and public sector undertakings, discovers triumphantly that most of the nominees are TDP people of the kamma caste, he thinks that this is proof that 'all the posts are given to the chief minister's caste-men' and that 'he [the chief minister] patronises only one caste, that is, the kammas'. However, this does not by any means imply that this is the petitioner's real grouse or that this is the political essence of the matter. It only means that this way of perceiving and trumpeting reality is, in the first place, politically—that is to say, for purposes of 'mass mobilisation'—the most advantageous one for the section of this state's rich who are not as close to the present government as they would like to be; secondly, given the fact that the landholding castes—unlike the brahmins, harijans, traders and artisans—are regionally concentrated and can thus be identified superficially with class fractions, the perception seems to carry more veracity, and is, therefore, of considerable practical utility. To put it simply, the reddy gentry of Telangana and Rayalaseema need the argument that this is kamma rule and that the reddys are persecuted, in order to gather the reddy peasants behind them, which is essential for both gang fights and elections. And the regional concentration of the castes makes the argument possible and plausible.

Another major charge of the petitioner is the ultimate in what is usually called the 'criminalisation of politics': the appointment of persons involved in serious, criminal cases as ministers. Mention is made of two new entrants to the cabinet, Sivaprasada Rao, who is now the home minister, and Siva Reddy, the labour minister. The two of them are quite notorious for their goondaism. Sivaprasada Rao, a surgeon from Guntur district, has a penchant for leading riotous mobs against his opponents. In one single year, 1984, he had seven criminal charges, one of them an assault on a police officer. And this year, on 26 June, just a couple of weeks before his induction into the cabinet, he led a major assault on Congress(I) supporters in the village of Dechavaram, an assault that left forty houses and eighty

haystacks gutted and one man dead. To take such a man into the cabinet and to give him the home ministry requires uncommon contempt for matters like democracy and rule of law; in fact, it requires just the kind of contempt that NTR has. The other incumbent, Siva Reddy of Jammalamadugu, Cuddapah district, is perhaps even more notorious. So deeply is he involved in the murderous faction fights that his district is famous for that he has officially been given four armed police bodyguards to accompany him wherever he goes. During the Municipal Corporation elections in Hyderabad, on 15 February 1986, this gentleman and his associates, accompanied by armed guards, indulged in a booth-capturing spree armed with deadly weapons that included not only country-made bombs and ordinary guns but also a telescopic rifle. They fired their guns, threw the bombs and injured people at will. He is now the state's labour minister!

It may be left to the court to decide upon the constitutionality of a government, two of whose ministers are accused in serious criminal cases. What is more important is to identify the source of this criminalisation in increasingly vicious conflicts between sections of the rich. The reason for this escalation is twofold. The first and the most important is the inevitable internecine conflict among the propertied classes over the sharing of social surplus, which becomes increasingly severe as the number of competitors and their aggressiveness increase. The two worthies recently inducted to the AP cabinet were involved in crimes not of a personal nature, but of rioting and assault of one gang against another or against the general public. For the Dechavaram assault led by the present home minister occurred in the aftermath of the recent elections to the agricultural cooperatives, which saw unprecedented levels of violence. The second and related reason is the general crisis of stagnation that has hit the world economy hard and has cut down the size of the cake that everyone wants a share of. Thus, the 'criminalisation' of politics is something that has come to stay and perhaps even grow, and it is not clear what a writ of *quo warranto* can do about it.

The last major plaint of the petition concerns the general increase in the violence for which the establishment is responsible—deaths in police custody, deaths in fake 'encounters', deaths in drought-hit areas due to starvation caused by official negligence, and 'atrocities on harijans'. It evokes some sort of pleasure to find that ruling class politicians are today driven to accept that such things are needed for declaring a government unconstitutional. The petitioner quotes unabashedly and extensively from a Telugu booklet published by the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee to recount the saga of atrocities perpetrated during NTR's regime. About eighty-five CPI(ML) activists and their sympathisers have been killed in 'encounters', more than nine-tenths of which were fake, since NTR came to power, and this Congressman gives no hint to the court that when his party ruled the state, more than 400 such deaths took place, nor that in less exigent circumstances, he and his party would be the first to swear that the victims deserved their fate. Such is the power of material necessity. In addition to these political victims, during the last two years and nine months, about seventy-five persons, mostly petty criminal suspects, have been beaten and tortured to death in police custody. Incidents of 'atrocities on harijans' are on the rise, and entail the involvement of the close relatives of men in power.

With these 'atrocities', the picture described in pieces above can be summed up. The rise of aggressive new rich classes aspiring for more power and for a realignment of the economic structure in their favour, increasing fractional conflict among the propertied classes which assumes all conceivable forms from gang fights in villages to NTR's anti-centre rhetoric (which is one of the 'unconstitutional' acts that the petitioner complains about), and the consequent unfolding of a culture of violence and lawlessness, inevitably lead to 'atrocities' on the toiling masses and their activists, either by the police or the landlords. It is small wonder then that, given the ineluctability of the phenomenon, NTR does nothing to either curb it or to punish the guilty, in spite of a gathering pile of judicial enquiry reports on cases of police killing. And here we do know that writs issued by courts are of little use, since civil liberties organisations have frequently approached the courts in these matters and, in return, have at best got infructuous enquiries, and at worst abusive rejoinders from the government.

Pitting the Tribals against the Non-Tribal Poor

EPW, 27 May 1989

East Godavari is perhaps the most picturesque district of Andhra Pradesh. The Godavari delta, which forms a major part of its coastal region, vies with the Kerala coastline in its beauty and charm, though on a closer view, one is bound to be struck by one sharp difference: the lack of anything resembling a drainage system to complement the canal system of the Godavari anicut makes the delta more hospitable to mosquitoes than to human beings, to the point of making it nearly uninhabitable in some areas and some seasons for the poorer sections of the people. To a casual visitor, however, the criss-crossing canals, the closely planted paddy fields, the fishery tanks, and, of course, the inimitably beautiful coconut groves combine to create a picture of enduring charm and appeal.

Away from the coast, across National Highway 5, are the rising slopes of the longest unbroken stretch of proper hills that the Eastern Ghats can boast of; the range starts a little beyond Rajahmundry and goes on and on at an average peak height ranging between 3,500 and 4,000 feet, through Visakhapatnam, and Srikakulam, and ends up well beyond Jeypore and Rayagada in Orissa. This range is the sentinel that guards the south-eastern corner of the great Central Indian Plateau. The northeast of this plateau—Chhattisgarh—has caught the attention of historians and journalists writing of the unremitting struggles of its tribal people. However, the koyas and konda reddys of the Godavari Agency, the savaras, jatapus, kondhs and

bagatas to their north, have waged an equally tenacious—if intermittent—struggle for centuries against the encroachment of people from the plains and their state, and more particularly during the last century and a half against the oppressive consequences of imperialist depredation and 'development'. Even as their struggle pre-dates the demarcation of their homeland as an Agency area, it has continued right through all the welfare laws and institutions that are the *raison d'être* and the necessary consequence of the demarcation, right down to this very day. These fituris[1] of the Rampa[2] region, as the British called them, have yet to find the historian they deserve.

The delta, however, has remained largely indifferent to and unaffected by the troubles of the hills. The only time the tribals descended to the plains was in the mid-sixteenth century, when they raided Eluru, much to the south of the Godavari delta. The two major streams that the Godavari splits into just below Rajahmundry enclose the delta in a seemingly impregnable embrace; and the names of the streams, Gowthami and Vasishtha, stand testimony to its brahminical thick skin, which makes it impregnable in more than a physical sense. The delta is the most intensely brahminical region of the state; it is a centre of brahmin tradition as well as brahmin reform, with the reform being as insular as the tradition. Indeed, rather remarkably, it is the towns sandwiched between the turbulent Agency area north of the Godavari, on one side, and the Bay of Bengal, on the other—from Rajahmundry to Barampur (Berhampur)—that have produced almost all the brahmin reformers of the Telugu nation, the equivalents of the *bhadralok* reformers of what used to be called the Bengal Renaissance (the equivalence was part of their self-perception: Kandukuri Veeresalingam,[3] the most eminent of them, was proudly acclaimed as the 'Iswarchandra Vidyasagar of Andhra'), and yet there is not a whisper in the reformers' writings about the troubles of the hills.

The Agency has remained equally indifferent to this brahminism and its reforms. It has gone its way, fighting the British state, the non-tribal land-grabbers and moneylenders, and its own oppressive *muttadars,* or tribal chiefs converted into revenue intermediaries during Asafjahi rule,[4] and

[1] Literally means complaints, a status to which a rebellion was reduced by the British.
[2] Popularly known as the Rampa Revolt (1922–24) in the region encompassing the present East and West Godavari, Visakhapatnam and Khammam districts of Andhra Pradesh and the Malkangiri district of Orissa.
[3] Social reformer (1848–1919), who fought against child marriage and supported widow remarriage.
[4] The Asafjahi dynasty was founded in 1720 by Mir Qamar-ud-Din Siddiqi, a viceroy of the Deccan under the Mughal emperors from 1713 to 1721. It ended on 17 September 1948.

allowed to continue in that position by the British. The best-known struggle was the one led by Alluri Seetarama Raju, himself a man of the plains-turned-ascetic, which lasted two full years from 1922 to 1924, and spread all over the Agency area from Bhadrachalam to Srikakulam. But the Agency has known no real 'peace' of any considerable duration for the last hundred years and more.

There has, however, been some change in the issues that the tribals are fighting over. For one thing, as the times progress, the needs of the ruling classes undergo changes. Since all their needs turn into a form of oppression of the people, the change in their objective interest is given the form of an accommodation to the people's protest. The *muttadari* system was needed by the pre-colonial and colonial states at a time when land revenue and related taxes constituted a major source of the income of the ruling classes. The tribals hated it both for the plunder it entailed and the oppressive practices that the muttadars developed by using their power. But the abolition of the muttadari system came only long after the British left, and long after land revenue ceased to be an important source of the state's income, though it was made to appear as a concession to the tribals' demand. On close examination, it can be seen this is the nature of all the reforms that have been given an effective form in the tribal areas. The legitimisation of the criticism and condemnation of the greedy private traders operating in tribal tracts is another example. The tribals have been smarting under that exploitation for centuries, going back to well before British rule, but it was only when the modern Indian state (beginning with the colonial state) decided that the forests are too valuable to be left to the depredations of petty traders, that efforts to control their activities were initiated. These reforms—abolition of muttadari, enactment of legislation banning private trade in minor forest produce, and the setting up of Tribal (Girijan) Cooperative Corporations to replace the private trader—were undertaken post-1970, in the aftermath of the Srikakulam uprising,[5] and trumpeted as reforms that were meant to assuage tribal unrest.

However, when it becomes necessary to give institutional or statutory accommodation to a demand of the people *before* that becomes objectively convenient for the ruling classes, the demand has been either consistently suppressed with brute force or accommodated merely on paper. Land is the most obvious example. Land-grabbing by non-tribal people from the plains, whether by legal sanction (for instance, a land grant) or physical eviction or in settlement of high-interest debts, is a long-standing problem of the forest-dwellers. Indian rulers from Mauryan[6] to British times have supported such eviction ostensibly in the interest of extending cultivation, but actually in the interest of increased revenue to the state. As long as the tribals had the option of retreating further into the forests and clearing some more land for cultivation, at least a solution was available, but with the rise of commercial and industrial uses of forests and the consequent 'protection' of forests, this option has been effectively closed.

[5] Tribal–peasant uprising of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the then Srikakulam district of north Andhra Pradesh.

The protection of forests in the form of 'reservation' is an extremely arbitrary act. It has no norms except the whims of the state. Lands that have been under the plough for decades, and plots that have housed tribal families for equally long periods, are suddenly converted into forests by fiat. And then not only cultivation and residence but also the grazing of cattle, the collection of firewood or timber for house construction, and the gathering of minor forest produce for sale become illegal and, therefore, prohibitively costly for the tribals as they entail bribes, fines and court expenses. The struggle against this arbitrary monopolisation of nature has, over the years, assumed greater and greater importance as an object of tribal struggles, even as the problem of land alienation by non-tribals continues.

To this problem of land, the state has no answer except a lot of double talk. On the one hand, any opposition to the state's monopolisation of the forests in the name of development—or even ecological balance for that matter—is taboo, and on the other, land alienation by people from the plains is something over which copious tears are shed, but nothing is done to set it right. It was in the year 1917 (close on the heels of a two-year-long hit-and-run tribal insurgency in the Godavari Agency) that the British enacted the first Agency Tract Interest and Land Transfer Act. Seventy-two years and many more enactments later, about 56 per cent of the cultivable land in the Scheduled Areas[7] (about 8.7 lakh acres) is under the ownership of non-tribals, while the extent of land restored to tribals under these enactments is about 9 per cent of this area (about 80,000 acres). And if anybody can ever manage to estimate the extent of agricultural land that is nominally under the ownership of tribals but is actually being held and cultivated by non-tribals, these statistics would reveal an even more miserable state of affairs.

[6] The Mauryan dynasty ruled a large swathe of the subcontinent from 321 to 185 BCE.

[7] Refers to the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which deals with the administration and control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in these areas. Essentially, the Fifth Schedule is a historic guarantee to tribals on the right over the land they live in.

Without admitting, and accounting for, this failure, the government of AP is now acting as if there is no problem left, and on the contrary, it is the difficulties of the non-tribal settlers that have got to be remedied. They are allegedly being harassed by the uncertain prospect of being evicted any day and are, therefore, unable to develop the lands that they have grabbed. The restriction on the state of land in the Scheduled Areas is another alleged hindrance. The sentimental argument is being put forward that a farmer who needs to sell some land to get a daughter married off is deprived of that convenience. On this plea, the state government recently announced its intention to scrap Regulation I of 1970, the last and purportedly the most severe of the enactments made during the last seventy years and more to protect the tribals from non-tribal land-grabbers. The regulation imposes on the non-tribal landholder in a Scheduled Area the burden of proving that the land was not acquired in contravention of the law; it prohibits not only the sale of tribal land to non-tribals but also the sale of land by one non-tribal to another in Scheduled Areas, for if such sales are allowed, then in the event of any tribal filing a claim to such land, producing the proof or disproof of such a claim would become very difficult. And it adds the clause that if any non-tribal landholder nevertheless wishes to dispose of land, then the government must buy it and give it to landless tribals.

This regulation was one more consequence of the Srikakulam uprising. What is remarkable about it is that though the consolidation of land alienation laws for the newly created state of Andhra Pradesh took place in the year 1959 (the AP Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation), the rules required for its implementation were not framed for ten years, that is, until the Srikakulam uprising broke out and was drenched in the blood of 'encounters'. But as soon as Regulation I of 1970 was enacted, the non-tribals reacted strongly against it, and one of them, Pandiri Rami Reddy, went to court challenging it in 1971. The regulation spent nearly 18 years in court before the Supreme Court upheld it and blessed it with Constitutional sanction. But while the non-tribals lost their plea with the judiciary, they won it with the executive; not merely the party in power, but the *entire* legislative opposition, including the two Communist parties (which are making embarrassed noises now) put pressure on the TDP government to repeal the regulation which it had, with seeming tenacity, defended for eighteen years in court. Some procedural legitimisation was needed, and so the Tribal Advisory Council, consisting of MLAs from the Scheduled Tribe constituencies and bureaucrats of relevant departments, was put under heavy pressure to 'recommend' the repeal, and was reportedly convened sixteen times to achieve this end. Ultimately it did 'recommend' the repeal, and the state government then announced its intention to repeal the regulation that it had never begun to implement. Some moral legitimisation was also needed, and, therefore, much emphasis was put on the difficulties of the small non-tribal landholders in the Scheduled Areas. It is the harassment they are suffering that is being put forward as the moral justification for the repeal.

Since there are a large number of small and medium non-tribal landholders in the Scheduled Areas, this ruse is intended to create a mass base for the state's anti-tribal policies, and an assured following for the non-tribal landlords, whose aims go well beyond the repeal of one regulation or two. Way back in 1979, the then Congress chief minister of the state, Marri Chenna Reddy, had issued a Government Order (GO) exempting 'small' landholders holding up to five acres of wet land or ten acres of dry land from the operation of the land alienation laws. The high court then struck down the GO as improper; and, constitutionality apart, given the widely varying conditions of cultivation in the state, this definition of a 'small' landholder is extremely dubious. The owner of a ten-acre plot in the black cotton soils of Adilabad, or a ten-acre orchard of mango or cashew in the East Godavari or Visakhapatnam Agency, is far from being a 'small' landholder; and the same is true of an owner of five acres of wet land in the *ayacut* of perennial irrigation tanks like Laknavaram or Pakhal in the Scheduled Area of Warangal, or in the ayacut of the minor irrigation projects on mountain streams that abound in and around the Parvatipuram Agency of the old Srikakulam district. In any case, this small non-tribal landholder is much like the poor brahmin, who is invariably dragged into the argument while opposing reservation in jobs to Backward Classes. The existence of poor people among groups which are characterised by attributes that connote structural—statutory or social—privilege, is no argument against safeguarding the less privileged groups from inequality and oppression. As for the desired unity of the tribal and non-tribal poor—there is much scope for real (as opposed to forced) unity: lack of access to forest land and other forest produce like timber and grazing; corrupt and oppressive practices of the forest officials as well as revenue and tribal welfare officials; low wages paid for procuring minor forest produce (for instance, *tendu* leaf, and gum); low wages paid for casual labour in the Forest Development Corporation's depots; all these are common problems, which have united the tribal and non-tribal poor in the Scheduled Areas in a joint struggle against the state and other oppressive forces, under the leadership of the CPI(ML) groups. In particular, expropriation of the lands of the non-tribal landlords in the Scheduled Areas, and a thorough rationalisation of the state's monopoly

over forest land as well as forest produce, would go a long way towards solving the problems of the tribals and the non-tribal poor. This is the truth that the state does not want the people to realise, which is why it pits the interests of the tribals against those of the 'small' non-tribal landholders.

When such a consistently deceitful attitude determines the fate of the land occupied by non-tribals, the tribals have no option except to cut down more forests and cultivate the land. The following statistics indicate the extent of this need: while the non-tribals own about 8.7 lakh acres in the Scheduled Areas (with almost all of it being land held by tribals at one time), the tribals own only about 7 lakh acres. While the state government has restored only 80,000 acres to the tribals through the operation of its laws, the tribals have (according to the government's own allegation) cut down more than 1 lakh acres of forest land and are cultivating it with the active support of the naxalite groups. This explains why the largest single category of 'encounter' victims in AP consists of tribals. It also explains why nearly two full battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force and various categories of special police are roaming around the Scheduled Areas of the state in search of prey. It further explains why the burning down of tribal hamlets and the eviction of the inhabitants on the plea that they are illegally cultivating forest land constitutes a major form of police lawlessness in the state. In this situation, the tribals of the Agency area of East Godavari district have been the most severe sufferers. There is no adequate count of the number of houses burnt down, the number of people tortured, and the number of women raped by the police during the last five years within the police station limits of Addateegala and Rampachodavaram. It is an educative commentary on the nation's history that the names of the police stations and outposts that occur in this tale of horror—Addateegala, Rampachodavaram, Mampa, Jeddangi and Gudem in East Godavari district and Krishnadevipeta and Chintapalli in the neighbouring Visakhapatnam Agency—are precisely the same that recur time and again in the oft-recounted tales of attack and seizure of police weapons by the roving bands of Alluri Seetarama Raju and his militants more than sixty-five years ago. We have not progressed much in many matters.

The plains have remained as indifferent as ever, as silent as they were in the face of the brutal suppression of the old fituris of Rampa. But this time around, the Agency is taking its revenge, though unfortunately in a perverse way. The culture of brutal policing that has governed the hills for many decades has now finally descended to the delta. And from the rebellious tribals it has spread to respectable and nominally influential members of society, to wit, journalists and Janata Dal and TDP leaders. For the last six months, there has been a continuous flow of news from Rajahmundry about the lawless behaviour of the town's policemen without any provocation whatsoever. Right now, a judicial enquiry is on against an assistant superintendent of police (SP), Rajiv Trivedi, for having allegedly gone berserk one day and beaten up Janata Dal and TDP leaders. And during the tumultuous week that followed the murder of V.M. Ranga Rao in Vijayawada, a party of journalists equipped with curfew passes was thrashed gleefully by him in full knowledge that he could easily claim immunity in the prevailing climate of tension. But the real target he had in mind was a young journalist named Sivaramkumar, who has suffered unprecedented persecution at the hands of the police of East Godavari district during the last one year.

Sivaramkumar edits and publishes a local paper called *Gowthami Times*. He is the only one to have taken a vocal stand against the culture of lawlessness that pervades the policing of the district. Although his writings are a little adventurist and not always polite, his courage in questioning the behaviour of the SP cannot be doubted. In retaliation for this boldness, the police of the district have subjected him to merciless harassment. Last March, he was arrested four times and charged with abduction, blackmail, theft and arson, the last under the Terrorist Act, TADA.[8] (I do not know if any other journalist in the country has been held under the Terrorist Act.) He was openly threatened that he could be taken to the Agency area and shot dead in an 'encounter', and no questions would be asked. And at each stage, his persecutors made it clear to him that they were acting under the direction of the SP. The last time he was arrested, the SP met him in person and told him to fold up his papers and leave the district, or face the consequences.

But he would not bend. Instead, he filed a private complaint against the SP, alleging illegal detention, harassment, implication in false criminal cases and theft of printing material. This audacity infuriated the police further, and they waited for a chance to teach him a lesson. The chance came with the murder of the Congress(I) MLA, V.M. Ranga Rao, at Vijayawada on 26 December 1988. Rioting broke out in most towns of coastal Andhra Pradesh soon after the murder, and curfew was imposed thereafter. Journalists were issued curfew passes to go round the towns and gather information, and Sivaramkumar naturally wanted a pass for himself too.

[8] The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, known as TADA, was an undemocratic legislation introduced by the central government in 1985. It was allowed to lapse in 1995 due to widespread public opposition.

What the police did is best described by quoting from the signed complaint that he has filed before the Press Council:

> On the morning of 27th December the president and secretary of the Press Club of Rajahmundry prepared a list of the journalists in the town and submitted it to the superintendent of police, Dr D.T. Naik, for issual of curfew passes. The SP struck off my name and issued passes for the others.
>
> On the 27th, 28th and 29th I moved around without a curfew pass, in the company of the other reporters, and filed stories for my paper. On the 29th morning, as our group of press reporters were walking along a street, a group of special policemen accosted us. Though those reporters who had passes immediately showed their passes, the policemen thrashed all of them with lathis. They were thus driven away, and I was arrested and taken to Two Town police station. Immediately after being put in lockup, some plainclothes policemen came there, took me out of lockup and beat me up mercilessly. Later, at about 9.00 pm, the SI came there. He made me undress down to my underwear and locked me up. Soon, two eunuchs (hijras) were brought from somewhere and put in the same lockup.
>
> At about 9.30 p.m., the ASP of Rajahmundry Mr Rajiv Trivedi came there along with Mr Govinda Narasimhulu, SI of One Town police station, and an assistant SI of One Town police station. The SI had a camera attached with a flash bulb in his hand. The ASP dragged me out of the lockup, made me remove even my underwear, and thrashed me unremittingly for one full hour on my naked skin. Then I was photographed in that condition. The ASP then directed the 55 policemen who were in the station compound to come inside and hit me on my head one by one with their boots. Then he himself put his feet on my head and declared that *Gowthami Times* was now under his feet.
>
> Then the two eunuchs in the lockup were asked to come out. They were also forced to undress. Then myself and the eunuchs were forced to adopt indecent postures, and we were photographed forty times in different postures. When I asked for some water to drink out of exhaustion, the ASP tried in vain to make the eunuchs urinate in my mouth. Seeing that I was resisting his efforts, the ASP beat me so badly that I lost consciousness. After I regained consciousness, I was brought out of the police station, and at about 2.45 a.m. in the night I was forced to run stark naked up and down the street. Later the ASP again put me in lockup and thrashed me. Throughout he kept demanding that I should leave Rajahmundry, stop publishing *Gowthami Times*, and give up the profession of journalism. He threatened me that if I did not obey I would be shot dead. A tape-recorder was brought

> and I was forced to make all kinds of allegations into it against other journalists and important persons of Rajahmundry town. I was beaten continuously throughout this process, and I finally lost consciousness again. Then I was thrown into the lockup and the ASP left.
>
> At about midnight of 30th December I was taken in a jeep to Rampachodavaram police station. On 31st night I was again brought to Two Town police station, Rajahmundry. On 1st January some Congress(I) activists were brought to the police station on the charge of having burnt a bus in protest against Ranga Rao's murder. That evening they were produced in court, and on the midnight on 1st I was taken to One Town police station. On the morning of 2nd, the SI Mr Govinda Narasimhulu came there and took me out of lockup and told me that if I desisted from writing anything against the SP and the police department, I would get off with a minor case, and the SP would help me in my future life. I was made to put my signature on some blank papers.
>
> In the evening, at about 7.30 p.m., the ASP Mr Rajiv Trivedi came again, took me out of the lockup, and beat me horribly. He used three lathis, one after the other. He also told me that all that he had done was on the instructions of the SP, Dr D.T. Naik.[9]
>
> On the evening of 3rd, the SI took me out of lockup and told me that if I restarted the paper or even continued to live in Rajahmundry town or East Godavari district, the SP and ASP would not let me live, and I had better leave the district.

It was on the evening of 4 January that Sivaramkumar's arrest was recorded by the police. He was shown as having been arrested in connection with the burning of a bus in protest against Ranga Rao's murder. The crime was booked under TADA. It took him more than three weeks to obtain bail, and he is back in Rajahmundry again, preparing to resume his paper against all odds. The odds include not only the bunch of sadists dressed up as policemen who are ruling the district, but also the deafening silence of the journalists' unions of the state, who take to the streets in vocal protest if a journalist of the big press is so much as beaten by a traffic constable for parking his scooter in the wrong place, but have not expressed one word of protest against what the police have done to Sivaramkumar, for (they allege on the strength of police information) that his paper is a 'yellow' paper and that he is a blackmailer. Such priggishness would be out

[9] Another notorious trigger-happy police officer, who retired recently as additional director general of police. He contested the 2009 Lok Sabha polls from Mahbubabad constituency in Warangal district on the Chiranjeevi-led Praja Rajyam Party ticket and lost.

of place at any time, but is positively laughable at a time when the entire 'national press', as much as the respectable 'regional press', has given up all pretence to objective reporting and balanced comment, and has visibly descended into the murky world of political manoeuvres.

The Elections in Andhra Pradesh

EPW, 23 December 1989

The search of the ruling classes for a way out of the mess they have landed themselves and the country into has not even managed to create a new political context for itself with these elections. It is not just that the National Front has not swept the polls; it would have been no different if it had. The fact that the 'Nehru model' needs updating/repair/rejection, that the economy needs some more opening up, and that it is no longer very prudent to talk of land reforms is accepted by all sections of the ruling classes, though some of them continue to pay obeisance to old times for ideological reasons. But that is where the analysis ends. A more intelligent and capable ruling class would have at least generated some alternative models and placed them before the electorate, but what we have had instead is a little more of what we have been seeing for the last decade: the unending search for a political leader, party or formation that would hold everybody together and propose an alternative. These elections have not provided even this much. Vishwanath Pratap Singh[1] affects a tight-lipped manner, apparently in the belief that still waters would be presumed to run deep, but his silence merely means that he has nothing to say which Rajiv Gandhi[2] has not said before him.

[1] Prime minister from December 1989 to November 1990.
[2] Prime minister from October 1984 to December 1989.

What these elections have proved yet again is that the search for an alternative, given the context of a completely disillusioned and irreverent—though, unfortunately unorganised—electorate, would necessarily be a very violent one. The various sections of the ruling classes are jostling with each other in the rush to gain a vantage point in the hoped-for restructuring of the national consensus that is nowhere in sight. This necessitates not only violent conflict among the masses, but also their violent suppression, partly because no section of the ruling classes knows of any other way of convincing the masses to go along with it rather than with the others, and partly to stop the dangerous possibility of the masses rejecting the proffered framework and seeking an alternative to it.

The visible strengthening of the opposition and the weakening of the Congress(I) does not represent any of the things that it is supposed to represent: the victory of morality over corruption, of decentralisation over centralisation, of democracy over authoritarianism, of the 'Gandhi model' over the 'Nehru model', of the 'rich peasantry' and the 'regional elite' over the monopoly bourgeoisie, or of the old bourgeoisie over the new buccaneers. It is not that the Congress(I) is not corrupt, or that it is not authoritarian, or that it does not believe in a centralised polity, or that the new racketeering type of flashy operators of the corporate world have not been generously welcomed by that party. It is much more doubtful that the Congress(I) or its Nehru model have exclusively or principally served the urban capitalists as against the poor and oppressed rural gentry and regional elite. However, that is not the point at all. The point is that what the opposition actually represents is by no means what it professes to represent. Its professions and protestations are tailored to appeal to the democratic sentiments of the masses. Rural vs urban, small vs big, Gandhi vs Nehru, are all polarities well suited for this purpose. It is a myth diligently propagated that these polarities define a new paradigm about which nobody is at all serious. The shape that the economy and the polity were given in the 1950s has long since got entangled in a web, and while the cutting of the threads of self-reliance and state control has everybody's approval, that tinkering has not satisfied anyone. The Tatas and Birlas (about whom some people are already getting nostalgic) are as dissatisfied as the Nusli Wadias and the Vijay Mallyas; and the upstart rural and regional elite is as dissatisfied as either of them. The ongoing scramble is principally a rush to be at the head of the field in the hunt for an alternative, and secondarily, a prudent desire to loot as much as possible in the meantime. If their own incapacity to produce a single ruler capable of solving the problem is the fault of the ruling classes, the increasing restlessness of the masses in the

interim is their misfortune. They find it prudent to stick to the compulsions of electoral democracy not because they believe in its liberal precepts, but because firstly, the masses will not accept anything less, and secondly, because it provides the only feasible framework for sorting out the differences among as diverse a class as India's ruling class. For these reasons, they must willy-nilly carry the masses with them, which accounts for the all-round violence, both among the contending political formations, and against the masses.

The poet Sri Sri,[3] like most progressive Andhraites of his generation, suffered from a certain sense of pride in his Telugu identity; he used to say that in all matters of political significance, it is Andhra Pradesh that shows the way to the nation. Whether that is necessarily a matter for celebration is a bit doubtful—for the path that the nation has been traversing is not altogether commendable—but it is true that the alignment of social classes, and the politics of the ruling classes as well as that of the most extreme opposition, has exhibited itself most starkly in Andhra Pradesh. If one counts out Bihar, where electoral violence is no longer a matter for comment—no longer an abnormal mode of political discourse, in currently fashionable language—the maximum amount of electoral violence was seen this time in Andhra Pradesh. About thirty-two persons were killed on the day of the polling and the next two days (one cannot be exact because one has to make allowance for the rumoured number of dead bodies, on the one hand, and likely coincidences on the other), and about nineteen died in pre-poll violence, including ten in intended murders and nine in the accidental explosion of bombs that were meant for killing other people. Among those murdered were an independent candidate in Raychoti in Cuddapah, and a polling officer in the same district. Rigging was so extensive that repoll was ordered in about 570 booths (this was announced with an unbecoming but audible sense of pride by the chief election commissioner, Peri Shastry, who is himself an Andhraite). The quantity of explosives that the contestants hurled at each other is beyond estimation. The kind of terror this caused among the public is new to Andhra politics. Every day during the month-long campaign—and more so on the days of polling and counting—people lived in a constant expectation of a bloodbath. As the poll results were expected to come out after 5 p.m. on 26 November, both the public and the shopkeepers at many places got ready for an extended curfew. People purchased what they would need two days hence, and where they themselves did not think of doing so, friendly shopkeepers

[3] Legendary modern Telugu poet Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (1910–83).

urged the precaution upon them. The worst-affected districts were Cuddapah, Kurnool and Anantapur, where the conflicts of traditional landlord gangs have, in recent years, taken on the political form of intra-Congress(I) or Congress(I)–Telugu Desam Party (TDP) gang fights, and the prosperous districts of Guntur, Krishna, Prakasam, Chittoor and the environs of Hyderabad, wherein the recent phenomenon of vicious intra-elite violence, and the violence of the vulgar new rich against the dalits has found the most lethal expression. Ministers, ex-ministers and prospective ministers went around in jeeps carrying tons of explosives and other lethal weapons, supplemented by the rifles of their officially sanctioned security guards. These security guards themselves contributed quite a bit to the violence; in the execution of their duty of protecting the lives of these ministers and ex-ministers, they unwittingly became part of the marauding gangs. Being trained and permitted to open fire at the least excuse, they were usually the first to score hits.

The 'mainstream' reaction to this violence and to the general debasement of the electoral process is quite interesting. Most people would be outraged if one were to compare this violence with Punjab or with naxalite violence. An unstated presumption permeates the establishment 'common sense' that somehow this violence is part of the natural order of things, as indeed is all that is depraved and vulgar about the ruling classes. Violence is *kshatra* dharma, and all that one can do about it is to ensure that one is not around when the bombs are exploding. This traditional Hindu attitude has been reinforced in Indian politics by gandhism, whose precept of nonviolence is addressed to the masses and never to the rulers, and forms a major impediment to any objective discussion of the question of political violence. The killing of 200 people in Punjab in six months is a cause of much horror, but the killing of an equal number in a matter of a week in Bhagalpur in police violence and communal riots engineered and inspired by the ruling class parties merely causes regretful clicking of tongues, as if they were killed by an earthquake. What really happened in Andhra Pradesh on the day of polling would never have been guessed by someone who depended for his knowledge of things upon the pronouncements of the press and of men of public affairs. Throughout the one-month period prior to the day of polling, a constant fear was expressed that the People's War Group (PWG) of the CPI(ML) would render polling impossible in the Adilabad and Karimnagar districts by attacking booths and killing voters as well as poll officials. Sombre reports were written in the press declaring that those who venture to vote in those districts would be jeopardising their limbs. A large police force was deployed in those districts to save democracy from the extremists. Exhortations were made to the PWG not to employ violence on such a sacred occasion as voting day. That group, for its part, made life miserable for the campaigning candidates by declaring large areas out of bounds for them and setting on fire the vehicles of those who ventured into forbidden territory. But they did nothing to harm or obstruct the people who chose to go and vote, as indeed a large number did even in the areas strongly dominated by the PWG, and voting day passed off in absolute peace in the most feared districts where all the police were deployed, while all the violence took place in the areas where the police were taken from, and that violence was perpetrated by the defenders of democracy and non-violence.

This hypocritical attitude towards violence and 'extremism' was also exhibited in another direction. Two other CPI(ML) groups fielded candidates in quite a few assembly and parliamentary constituencies in about seven or eight districts. One seat, Yellandu in one of the 'Disturbed Areas'[4] of Khammam district, was earlier held by a CPI(ML) group, and Sircilla, also a 'Disturbed Area' of Karimnagar district, was felt to be a stronghold of another CPI(ML) group. For quite a few months prior to the election, the people of Yellandu—a mixed forest and coal mine area, populated largely by tribals—were subjected to a systematic assault by the Special Task Force (STF) policemen led by an additional superintendent of police (SP), one Krishna Prasad, self-confessedly Vengal Rao's man. The police warned them that this time they should not vote for the CPI(ML) candidate but for the Congress(I). Every night for the entire week prior to polling day, the STF policemen, specially trained to kidnap, torture and kill, went around the constituency armed with self-loading rifles and sten guns, dragging people out of their homes, thrashing them and threatening them with dire consequences if their MLA won again. The SP even claimed that he would discard his uniform if the CPI(ML) candidate won again. On polling day, the STF policemen went around the polling booths armed with their ugly weapons, signifying a visible symbol of terror for the tribal masses. Much the same happened in Sircilla in Karimnagar. It was as if it were a contest between the police and the CPI(ML). In the end, to the chagrin of the police, both the CPI(ML) candidates won the elections, frustrating their heroic efforts to save democracy from the 'extremists' by the use of brute force on the poor voters.

[4] The Disturbed Areas Act is a draconian legislation that gives the police extraordinary powers of arrest and detention—its origins lay in the Suppression of Disturbances Act, 1948. Variations of this Act, adapted by states, have been used wherever the state's might has been challenged—in Kashmir, Punjab, the Northeastern states and in Andhra Pradesh.

However, the hypocrisy is not confined to violence. Money and country liquor, which constitute a major means of mobilising votes, are two other dimensions of the debasement of the election process. And the hypocrisy extends to these dimensions too. It is not that this debasement is not noted and condemned. But a studious attempt is made to avoid drawing any conclusions from it. The more obscene electioneering becomes, the more it is idealised in principle. The right to vote, from being a political right of doubtful utility sold for money or liquor, becomes an object of—liberal or feudal—reverence, and a subject for high—liberal or feudal—preaching. Gun-toting goons and the newspaper hacks, who plead their cause for reasons of pecuniary gain or political advantage, talk of the 'vote' in worshipful tones. The English press invests it with liberal sentiments whose place in Indian politics is never questioned, while the less inhibited Telugu press describes the vote as the *vajra* or *pasupata* weapon of democracy with which the poor illiterate voter (somehow the poverty and illiteracy themselves acquire a mysterious power when people say this) can fell the mightiest ruler. Everybody knows today that electoral democracy in India is merely the optimal political framework for the complex task of sharing out of the nation's resources among the propertied classes, as also a legitimising seal for the less-than-optimal option of gang fights, whose purpose is again the same; but then the more illegitimate the *raison d'être* of electoral democracy becomes, the more the 'vote' must be idealised and mythicised. The reverence one exhibits for the vote must be carefully severed from any considerations of how it is being mobilised or what use it has been put to by those who have won it in the past. That is the only way to ensure that the vote is cast. This idealisation of the vote has penetrated significantly into popular consciousness, wherein it coexists with the people's perception of the vote as a medium of self-expression: if you do not like your MLA, you may not be able to do much about it but you can at least tell him off by voting against him.

But even so it is a mystery that in a country where people commonly allege about the ruling parties that 'all of them are thieves', voting at election time continues to flourish. Why people vote, and why they vote for whosoever they vote for, is a very difficult question to answer. One can evade the question by taking recourse to statistics, computers and the sociological imbecility that has beset all the social sciences, and indulge in the macro-level arithmetical analysis of 'swings' and 'waves', but the real question is a very difficult one. There seem to be basically four kinds of voting: rigged voting, mobilised voting, politically conscious voting, and the kind of voting that takes place because everybody else is voting and

there is nothing much else you can do on poll day. These different categories shade off into each other at the edges. Mobilised voting, for instance, is the kind of voting that takes place through the distribution of money or liquor, or when a local leader or elder or a plain goon urges or commands the people to vote for the candidate whom he favours, and it is believed to be imprudent to disobey him. This latter situation is not very different from rigging. On the other hand, a considerable amount of politically conscious voting takes place on the basis of loyalty to a party or an individual, or as an opportunistic quid pro quo in exchange for some benefits, in which case it is difficult to distinguish it from mobilised voting. Equally, those who believe that they have mobilised a large number of voters by means of bribes in cash and kind may discover that the votes have been cast for someone else as an act of a political slap-in-the-face.

The point of saying all this is that it is an arguable hypothesis that while mobilised voting used to be the single largest category in the early decades after independence, it is gradually yielding place to rigged voting, on the one hand, and politically conscious voting, on the other. This is, by the way, another reason for the increase in electoral violence. Elections can be peaceful only as long as—or to the extent whereby—the votes can be manipulated and mobilised; the other two situations require violence. The increase in politically conscious voting means that to that extent, the people are consciously casting their votes, though it is more often against someone than for someone. The fact that this change should take place simultaneously with an all-pervasive disgust for not only the various political formations of the ruling class but for the polity as a whole is a seeming paradox. But all paradoxes are only apparent: that is their law. They merely serve to indicate an unresolved contradiction, in this case, that the people are not able to perceive that their vote is something which legitimises and reproduces the very polity that they find so disgusting and repulsive; instead they have learnt to see the vote as a means of self-assertion, a way of telling off those in power. The realisation that the more enthusiastically they turn out at election time to vote out of power a corrupt or authoritarian regime, the more they reinforce the system that produces the corruption, is something that is yet to penetrate popular consciousness. A mere increase in disgust will not bring about that awareness. An alternative form of political assertion—assertion against the system as such—must assume concrete form for that to happen.

Meanwhile, one can only marvel at how effectively the people have told off the whole lot of politicians this time! Perhaps nobody has been taught a more thorough lesson than N.T. Rama Rao (NTR). In history, there is a

type of ruler who has the misfortune of acquiring a reputation for invincibility in foreign lands. NTR is one such person. His invincibility was taken so much for granted outside Andhra Pradesh that it is doubtful that even the most pessimistic of the National Front's crystal-gazers foresaw his defeat. But the invincibility of NTR was a myth nurtured as carefully by the press as that of Rajiv Gandhi was by Doordarshan and All India Radio. Without equating state monopoly over the electronic media with the conscious political partisanship of the press, it must nevertheless be said that the press—not only the *Indian Express* with its great notoriety but most of the Telugu press too—did a lot to promote NTR's image as the undisputed leader of the Telugu people. The proof of his invincibility was seen even in his ability to throw out from the cabinet and the party everyone who disagreed with him (what must be rankling him most today is that all but one of them have now come back to the Assembly on Congress tickets, and some have been made ministers), and more proof of the same was seen in his ability to dismiss his entire cabinet one fine evening, go off to Delhi for two days, and come back and reconstitute the cabinet with twenty-one new faces. A champion of democratic politics like the *Indian Express* then editorially expressed awe at the man's 'grip' over his party, and even those who criticised him for acting with such arbitrariness nevertheless held up his masterly control over the party affairs as a commendable contrast to the infighting in Rajiv Gandhi's party. The sands were receding fast under his feet but they were all admiring his grip up there. It was not merely the popular support that was receding, even the class base of the TDP was deserting NTR in disillusionment. Ramoji Rao's *Eenadu*, the authentic voice of that section of the Andhra elite which created the TDP, was the most faithful friend of the class even when it criticised the party and leader, as it did with increasing frequency during the last year or so. However, even *Eenadu* emanated signals of this desertion of NTR by his class base through the mute impartiality that characterised its attitude towards the election campaign, in sharp contrast to its unbridled and vulgar partisanship towards NTR during previous elections.

For the rest, the press was busy with that inane vocation called psephology according to which if you know the percentage of votes that each party got in all the previous elections, and if you are further capable of adding three per cent or subtracting five per cent in deference to a 'wave' whose likelihood and direction there is no way of knowing, then that tells you all that one can ever know about the coming elections. The Telugu press evidently found this novelty very gripping, for all possible information about the percentages of votes polled district-wise, constituency-wise and booth-wise was collected and printed day after day. It does not appear to have struck anybody as absurd that so much effort and newsprint should be expended in trying to guess what everybody would anyhow know in a couple of weeks' time. The incongruity inherent in the remarkably similar way in which the press treats horse racing and elections must immediately strike any observer. As elections are supposed to serve a higher purpose in a democracy than horse racing, the press would be serving its readership better if it were to describe the problems faced by the people in each constituency, and to analyse the contribution of the past governments, and the professions of the present contenders, in solving those problems. That the role of the press during elections is to predict their outcome is a very odd belief, but it comes next to the less odd but nevertheless unacknowledged belief that the duty of the press is to egg on people to vote for one party or the other.

In the end, all one can say is that NTR lost rather badly, and that repulsive breed of human beings called Congressmen are back in power at Hyderabad. There was a definite shift of the voters' preference away from him, which cannot entirely be attributed to accident or rigging. Rigging was extensive, but all of them rigged anyway. Notwithstanding all the righteous outrage about Amethi, and notwithstanding Vishwanath Pratap Singh's studied projection of a humble profile of low-cost and high morality electioneering, the fact is that they all spent huge amounts, and they all rigged. But the voters just did not want NTR and his 'friendly opposition parties'. It would be insulting the people of AP to say that they actually wanted the Congress(I) back, but they had no choice. The question as to why NTR lost is meaningless to those who know how the state was being run. There is no intelligible reason as to why he should not have lost. His regime was as unresponsive, inefficient and authoritarian as any previous Congress regime. The vulgar debasement of the Congress was replaced by ludicrous aggrandisement and unseemly antics. Corruption and favouritism were not only kept intact, but centralised so much that a large section of his own party was dissatisfied with the situation. There is perhaps no other party wherein the lower-level leadership resented the top leader as much as NTR's TDP. It was partly a just resentment at his habit of treating them in the way a police officer treats his orderlies, but partly a less reasonable resentment that all the graft enters the pockets of NTR and his sons-in-law, and they don't get to even smell it. The class of brokers, touts and middlemen is a very important group in Indian politics, and the Congress has survived principally by adequately satisfying each one of them individually. This class stretches all the way from village and mohalla leaders

to chairmen of cooperative and marketing societies, MLAs and ministers, Public Works Department (PWD) and excise contractors, and government servants employed in various departments like those of civil supplies, excise, revenue, forests and police. NTR managed to create a lot of disaffection among these people. As they would frequently put it colloquially, 'the Congressmen would eat and allow you to eat as well; this man wants to swallow everything himself'. This statement is not literally true, for many of these people made a lot of money in these six years, but it is certainly true that NTR has always exhibited a distinct distaste for sharing the loot with others. The disaffection of this class of middlemen did play a role in bringing him down, and yet he could not appeal to the people against them because he was not ostensibly fighting corruption as such. Nevertheless, he would have continued to get popular support if he had done anything at all for the people. He did just nothing, except to provide a certain quantity of subsidised rice to some of the poor, and a lot of free entertainment to the newspaper reading public. Nothing that involved any financial commitment from the state government ever got approval from him including: recruitment for posts in government departments and educational institutions; enhancement of pay for government servants or employees of aided institutions; maintenance works for roads or irrigation tanks; adequate drought or flood relief; and so on. And to top it all, his own inherent authoritarianism, the fascist nature of the new-rich class that forms his social base, and the over-centralised administration, combined to increase the importance of the police during NTR's rule. There was such an alarming increase in police violence, and the autonomy given to the police from civilian control was so total during these six years, that 'police excesses', from being a peripheral concern of civil liberties groups, has now come into the mainstream of the state's politics.

The 'friendly opposition parties' are now saying, 'I told you so', but they are not saying how much they themselves have contributed to this state of affairs. Their role in Andhra politics has been that of blackmailing NTR and the people with the threat of the 'return of the Congress', and thus getting seats from NTR and votes from the people. In return, they have provided NTR with a shameful respite from criticism and exposure. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose social base of brahmins, banias and the landholders of the Telangana districts has little love for NTR, would indulge in ridicule of his apparel and antics, but took good care to defend his regime; and come election time, it would snuggle up to him for seat adjustments. The CPI(M) stuck to NTR like glue, to the point of condoning every misdeed of his, and exhibiting more loyalty to him than even his own

partymen in times of internal crisis in his party. Everyone who questioned NTR and got thrown out of the party was dubbed as a Congress(I) agent, and all criticism of NTR was dubbed as being Congress(I) inspired. The CPI behaved likewise for a long time, but about a year ago, it turned around and started attacking the TDP and Congress(I) equally. For the first time in its long existence, the party was not running behind any ruling class party. Instead, it cobbled together a left and Democratic Front consisting primarily of itself and a few peripheral organisations and discards from NTR's party, and went around the state abusing both the TDP and Congress(I) as reactionary ruling class parties. Irrespective of the seriousness and sincerity of the communist leaders in making this switch, its cadres, especially the youth, were jubilant. For the first time in many years, they breathed an air of self-respect. For the communist cadres, there can be nothing more suffocating than a tactical alliance with a ruling class party, and when such an alliance with one or the other becomes a permanent feature, that can have a stultifying effect on the cadres. The spirit of liberation that the CPI cadres must have enjoyed for more than a year can be easily imagined. And when elections were announced, the CPI declared that it would go it alone and would not have seat adjustments with NTR. But suddenly, just a couple of days before the close of nominations, the CPI leadership did a total turnabout and entered into seat adjustments with NTR, and even put up a high and successful bid. The party cadres were furious; there were rumours of manhandling of party leaders by the cadres at the party's Hyderabad headquarters, and many resignations from the party followed.

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Chenna Reddy is back in power at Hyderabad. His victory does not mean a defeat for the regional elite of AP, for it is a false notion that the Congress(I) represents exclusively or principally the monopoly bourgeoisie—it does no such thing. It is a principal achievement of the Congress that it has always represented all the propertied classes of the country, though with a definite formula for the running of the economy and the sharing of economic resources and political power. That formula is now well past its usefulness for the ruling classes, and has been discredited and dishonoured. The NTRs of the country have merely asserted this demise without evolving a coherent alternative, but NTR's defeat does not mean that the pressure can be written off; indeed, even NTR himself cannot yet be written off.

Meanwhile, Chenna Reddy is going to do nothing to resurrect and bring to life the old Congress formula; he would regard it as beyond his limited

mandate, in any case. He would merely ensure that in the interim looting of the country, which defines the current phase of Indian politics, the section of the regional elite that felt deprived during NTR's rule would get their own back. Having castigated TDP rule as 'kamma' rule and campaigned so long against it, he has packed eight reddys into his nineteen-member cabinet. This is no doubt meant merely as a gesture of self-assertion, and others—especially the Backward Castes—will be accommodated in further bouts of cabinet expansion.

As regards the rest, happy days are here again for the class of touts, brokers and middlemen, the class that was first consolidated and shown a place in the sun during Chenna Reddy's earlier incumbency as the state's chief minister. The unusual joy with which he was welcomed and escorted to his office by the employees of the state secretariat—the ceremony resembled the return from exile of a beloved raja—signified in part a democratic reaction to the humiliation that the employees suffered during NTR's rule, but also in significant measure, a thoroughly reprehensible joy at the return to power of the man who institutionalised corruption in AP, and structured a fine network through which all concerned could make money. This is the only social group in AP that really loves Chenna Reddy, and their days have truly come back again.

II

Resisting Caste, Class in Agrarian Society

Peasant Struggle and Repression in Peddapally

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The peasant struggle of Karimnagar is an important chapter in the Indian agrarian revolution. Both in terms of maturity and depth, it has surpassed the Naxalbari[1] flare-up and (arguably) the Srikakulam struggle,[2] from which it has learnt many lessons. The time has not yet come to write its history, but it is certainly worthwhile to take a cross-sectional view of it.

The struggle started in Jagtial (Jagityala) and Sircilla (Sirsilla) talukas, and quickly engulfed Peddapally. Subsequently, it spread to Metpally, Manthani and Huzurabad. The area that has most recently been in the news is Peddapally, where on 22 February this year, the CPI(ML)[3] 'People's War'[4] organiser Devender Reddy became the sixteenth victim of police 'encounters' in the sixteen months since they were revived in September 1980.

Peddapally is in the northern part of Karimnagar district. It is trisected length-wise by two busy roads; one of them proceeds from the Singareni coal mine region (wherein coal, power, fertiliser and cement are produced)

[1] Naxalbari is the name of a village in Darjeeling district of West Bengal where a left-wing peasant uprising began in March 1967.
[2] The Naxalbari-inspired tribal–peasant uprising of the late 1960s and early 1970s took place in the then Srikakulam district of north Andhra Pradesh.
[3] The CPI(ML) was formed on 22 April 1969.
[4] Renamed as CPI (Maoist) in 2004 after CPI(ML) People's War's merger with Maoist Communist Centre of India.

down to Karimnagar and onwards to Hyderabad, carrying an incessant stream of lorries laden with coal, cement and fertiliser. The other road is the Chanda–Hyderabad highway, passing through forest-rich Adilabad, carrying an equally heavy traffic of lorries laden mostly with huge logs of timber and, in season, crates of juicy oranges from Maharashtra. What is remarkable is that in this steady stream of lorries, one rarely sees more than a few carrying bags of paddy or *mirchi* (chillies)—such a common sight in the Vijayawada–Guntur–Eluru region of Andhra Pradesh under the Green Revolution.

This is symptomatic of Peddapally, a region that transmits products of 'capitalist' India but has itself remained largely feudal. The taluka president of the Radical Youth League could think of only four landlords in the entire taluka who had tractors (in contrast with Jagtial where many landlords have turned modern). None of the landlords shows any interest in crops other than paddy and millets, and even then, they do not go in for fertiliser-hungry high-yielding varieties but stick to the traditional ones. This is despite the fact that Peddapally now gets water from the Pochampad project (on the Godavari river), as a consequence of which the price of land here has appreciated from about Rs 3,000 to Rs 20,000 per (wet) acre.

The second reason why the region is described as feudal is that the surplus appropriated by the landlords is not transformed into productive capital but is instead either consumed or 'invested' in mercantile activities. Unlike the rich kulaks of the Green Revolution region of Andhra Pradesh, the landlords of Peddapally do not even invest in rice mills. Husking is done domestically, though many of them use machines for the purpose. Most of the surplus goes into Public Works Department (PWD) contracts (including the Pochampad canal itself), shops (with the favourites being wine shops) and real estate in Karimnagar town or Hyderabad city. The most notorious case is that of a velama caste landlord of Jagtial, who owns about eighteen bus routes plying along kuccha roads joining villages to towns like Ramagundam, Peddapally and Dharmaram. He is said to bribe PWD people to keep the roads kuccha so that the State Road Transport Corporation cannot invade his *jagir*.

Finally, a sizeable section of the working people are exploited feudally. They are not tenant–peasants (tenancy has not developed to any considerable extent in Telangana) but feudal farm-servants. What makes this category of persons feudal is not that they are paid annually instead of daily (indeed, many of them are paid monthly) but that their wages are not calculated on the basis of the amount of work they do (that is, its computation in terms of the quantity of output or labour time), instead they are required to constantly be at the beck and call of the landlord and to look after an indeterminate amount of nonproductive chores in addition to a varying amount of productive work. In other words, what they sell is not their labour time (labour power employed for a certain time) but their entire time.

However, this alone does not capture the entire picture of feudalism in Peddapally. An equally important element is vetti or vettichakiri (*corvee*; *begar* in Hindi, meaning unpaid work). Vetti has been developed to an extraordinarily comprehensive extent in Telangana. It is not only the peasants who do vetti in the fields of the landlords, but *all* the working people suffer this abuse. The dhobi, the shepherd, the barber, the toddy-tapper, indeed everybody has to provide unpaid services on customarily specified occasions. Add to this the abuse of women belonging to the toiling classes by the landlords, and other feudal customs like the working people (particularly those belonging to the lowest castes) being expected not to wear a shirt or chappals in the presence of the dora (lord), and you have a complete picture of Peddapally—not in the days of the Nizamshahi but right up to 1978. For that was when the dam of the anti-feudal agrarian struggle burst in Peddapally.

One can conjecture any number of reasons for this struggle. It may be seen as a diffusion of the struggle of the Jagtial and Sircilla talukas, which had, by that time, already been declared as 'disturbed areas'. It may also be seen as a consequence of the construction of the Pochampad canal and the increasing commoditisation it brought in its wake (for after all, the agrarian revolution is only a democratic revolution). Finally, it may be seen as a long-awaited penetration of the communists into an area that was only waiting for them (Karimnagar was not involved as much as Warangal, Nalgonda and Khammam in the Telangana peasant uprising of 1946–51). Not that Peddapally had earlier been completely innocent of communist influence as there are some villages which were regarded as CPI 'strongholds', but given the nature of that party's politics during the last two decades, nothing much needs to be said about its ineffectiveness.

The struggle started in 1978 from the villages of Ranapuram and Kannala. The organisation which conducts the struggle is the Rytu Coolie Sangham, an all-purpose organisation whose concerns are far from being merely economic. The Sangham handles all kinds of problems including those pertaining to caste, sex, corruption, drinking, and so on. In quite a few villages, in fact, the Sangham constitutes the only local administrative authority respected by the poor—and in some cases, also the rich.

The struggle was initially organised around two issues. One is the

wasteland around the village that is often illegally grabbed by the landlords. The people forcibly occupied that land and distributed it among the landless. (Such occupation of illegally appropriated wasteland is an important element of the struggle in the entire region; the land thus occupied is either divided equally among the landless or cultivated collectively by them—with the latter being more common in the tribal regions.) The other issue concerns the 'fines' and 'fees' that the landlords have swallowed from the people during the unofficial panchayats for settling disputes between them. These fees and fines often amount to substantial sums. During the struggle, the people started demanding the return of the fees and fines, and also additional 'donation' to the Sangham from the landlords in fractional repayment of what has been appropriated from the people in the past.

When the state government started giving taluka-level *abkari* contracts[5] (from this year onwards), the Sanghams of various villages demanded (and got) compensation from the successful bidders for the loss suffered by small brewers. All this amounts to substantial sums of about Rs 10,000 to Rs 40,000 per village. This sum is kept with the local Sangham and used for common purposes like building schools, laying roads, paying teachers, getting tanks bunded, etc. (This work, which has demonstrated to the people that even at a constructive level, the Sanghams are different from the ruling class parties, appears to be one of the lessons learnt since the Srikakulam days: in those days such work would have been regarded as 'revisionistic'.)

All this came later, of course. The first struggle in Ranapuram and Kannala, led by Devender Reddy (a native of Ranapuram), then a lean and dutiful-looking college dropout, was for the occupation of 300 acres of wasteland appropriated by the landlords. Following the success of this struggle, the people of Palitem, Dongaturthi, Ramayapalle and Racchapalle villages invited Devender Reddy to organise them for undertaking the struggle to retrieve from the landlords the fees and fines that had in the past been collected from them.

As the movement spread, retaliation by the landlords (with willing help from the state) also increased. In quick succession, police camps were set up at Chintalapalli, Takkellapalli, Raginedu, Kukkalagudur and Putnur. The manner in which the camps were set up is instructive. Takkellapalli and Raginedu are dominated by Srinivasa Rao; he has lands in the latter village and at Takkellapalli, he manages the lands of a landlord called Mutyam Rao (most of the landlords of this region are velamas by caste), who died sometime ago. Mutyam Rao has left behind a son, but he is an invalid and a rake of the worst feudal kind to boot, and spends all his time at Hyderabad. Way back in 1978, Srinivasa Rao beat up and detained two peasants; thereafter, people from fifteen villages went to his house, caught hold of his two sons, and held him to 'ransom', claiming that they would let go his sons only if he released the peasants that he had detained. The exchange of the 'captives' took place, but immediately the police moved in, charged nearly 800 people with abduction and set up police camps at both Raginedu and Takkellapalli. Although the case has since been dismissed, the camps are yet to be lifted, even after nearly four years.

The names of Bhoomaiah and Kishta Goud, who were executed during the Emergency,[6] are well known. Bhoomaiah belonged to Putnur and had a piece of land in Kukkalagudur. In January 1979, it was decided to build a memorial for them in the latter village, and a public meeting was held, which was attended by about 15,000 people. This appears to have scared the landlords of the two villages, for they took to the offensive soon after the meeting. When the people of Putnur questioned the landlord, Rajeswara Rao, about wasteland and surplus land in his possession, he complained to the police that he had been attacked. A police camp was immediately set up at the village, and is still to be removed. At Kukkalagudur, the landlord and PWD contractor, Rajaiah (a one-time CPI sarpanch of the village), started malicious propaganda against the Sangham and the subsequent tussle also resulted in the setting up of a police camp at the village, which was removed only this January.

The presence of a police camp in a village automatically means that a police raj is established there, with no law except that of the lathi. Accounts of the repression unleashed by the police in these villages make for macabre reading. The policemen destroy crops by driving animals into fields ripe for harvesting or by stopping the water supply and destroying the crops (it is a general rule that water from the local tank has to pass by the landlords' fields to reach other people's fields, and so the police only have to enlist the help of the only-too-willing landlords to stop water supply to the peasants' crops). If a peasant has a motor to draw water from a well, they smash the motor and throw it into the well; if a peasant goes into hiding, they raid his house and throw his clothes, utensils and bags of paddy into the well. Narla Kishtaiah and his brother Narla Bucchimallu of Putnur have suffered losses worth about Rs 15,000 because of such depredations.

Ellenki Ramaswamy of Takkellapalli had his poultry destroyed and birds

[5] Abkari here refers to excise contracts, pertaining to the business of vending liquor.

[6] The national Emergency from June 1975 to March 1977, during which elections and civil liberties were suspended by the state.

stolen while he was in hiding from the police. Perhaps the worst sufferer is Galipalli Parvatalu, a casual labourer at the Kesoram Cement Factory (owned by the Birlas) near Takkellapalli, who does not have any property to be despoiled; so they attacked his person. His courage in exposing the misdeeds of the police enraged them and he was grimly ill-treated at the police camp at Takkellapalli. He was thrown on the ground and one end of a rifle was forcibly thrust into his stomach. His intestines were so badly damaged that he has not recovered from his injuries even after an operation. Being landless, he can sustain himself only if he works with his hands; but today, he cannot do even the most common work that casual labourers at a cement factory are required to do, that is, loading and unloading of cement bags.

None of these brutalities, however, could stop the movement from spreading, under the leadership of Devender Reddy. He appears to have been quite an extraordinary leader; the poor people of the villages of Peddapally talk in glowing terms about his dedication, integrity and tirelessness. He would lead hundreds of people, carrying red flags, which they would plant in waste/surplus land, and then till the land against all odds. Near Takkellapalli, there is a tree-covered hillock, which was being despoiled by the landlord, and which Devender Reddy led the people of the village to occupy and plant with teak and bamboo trees. The Sangham has also taken on the duty of guarding the hillock, and nobody is allowed to cut the trees, not even members of the Sangham. When the plants are fully grown, the Sangham will itself supervise cutting and sale of the timber (and undertake simultaneous replanting), whose proceeds will go to the Sangham and will be used either to pay an additional teacher at the school, or to strengthen the tank-bund, or for a similar purpose (that, at any rate, is what the Sangham leaders have planned, and would certainly have implemented had Devender Reddy not been killed; but after his killing, the police have started impounding the amounts saved with the Sanghams, and in some villages like Palakurti, have even charged the Sangham leaders with stealing/misappropriating the amount).

The most significant achievement of the struggle led by Devender Reddy is that vetti has been completely abolished. Hereafter, no landlord in Peddapally can hope to get unpaid services from any category of toilers, nor can he misbehave with women of lower castes. The struggle for increased wages has also been successful; while earlier daily labourers used to get Rs 3 to Rs 4 per day, they now get Rs 6 to Rs 7; the monthly wages of farm-servants have also increased to Rs 100. Curiously enough, the struggle for higher wages is generally listed as an afterthought in any discussion with Sangham leaders; it is not clear whether this indicates the relative ease with which these struggles were won or the weakly developed commodity-consciousness of the people.

Of course, all this could not be allowed to go on. Devender Reddy had to go, and he went. There was nothing very secretive about the arrangements made, either. The 'encounter' in which he died was with sub-inspector Prakash Reddy[7] of Ramagundam. At the magisterial enquiry conducted into his death on 16 March, Prakash Reddy told the Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) of Peddapally that 'as of 22/12/81, he had been deputed on special duty along with four police constables to apprehend underground cadre of extremists, Devender Reddy'. His jurisdiction covered the entire area of the Peddapally and Sultanabad talukas. It took him almost two months to get his quarry, and in the process, he raised such hell in the villages of the area that the people talk about their tormenter Prakash Reddy as much as they talk about their leader, Devender Reddy. Prakash Reddy has unleashed a reign of terror in the region that lasts even till today by destroying property, breaking the walls of wells, throwing people's clothes on the road and riding his jeep over them, beating women for the sin of feeding Devender Reddy during the latter's secret visits to the villages, brutally thrashing members of the Sangham, and spreading slanderous stories about Devender Reddy while accusing him of misappropriating the funds collected in the name of the Sanghams and of misbehaving with women (the people are more enraged about these slanders than about the murder). Now, Prakash Reddy poses the following question while visiting the villages: 'Has your new leader come? Who is he?'

Under Prakash Reddy's protection, the landlords have become more assertive; at Chintalapalli, the landlords forcibly took back from the Sangham the sum of Rs 1 lakh that they had been forced to give up in lieu of the illegal fees and fines that they had collected in the past. In neighbouring Guruvapalli, the Sangham had similarly taken Rs 5,000 from the landlord, this time a reddy. The day following the enquiry into Devender Reddy's death, the landlords acquired enough courage to get the sarpanch (who is sympathetic to the Sangham) arrested on the charge of extortion. The question, 'How are the landlords of your village?', which was posed to a woman of the village riding a bullockcart elicited the angry answer, 'They have returned to their old ways.' At Putnur, with the advent of Prakash

[7] Prakash Reddy made a career as a specialist in hunting naxalites and retired as deputy superintendent of police after a last stint in the industrial area of Hyderabad. He killed twelve naxalites during his career.

Reddy, the police and the landlords barred the toddy-tappers from climbing palmyra trees for three months, causing them to incur losses worth about Rs 7,000–8,000. If somebody stood surety for the arrested Sangham activists, very soon they too would find themselves under arrest. Quite a few sarpanches of the taluka have been arrested under spurious charges, for the sin of having stood surety for activists of their villages. Sarpanches who are sympathetic to the peasant movement signify a peculiarity of Peddapally taluka. The People's War Group (PWG) of the CPI(ML), which is leading the struggle there, boycotts all elections as a general rule but individuals sympathetic to the party do manage to get elected to local bodies as independent candidates against landlord-backed Congress(I) candidates.

Even as he was creating terror in the villages, Prakash Reddy was hatching a plot to capture his prey. Dharmaram is a village along the Hyderabad–Chanda road, about 40 km from Karimnagar. The landlord of Dharmaram is a velama, Damodar Rao, who has about 500 acres of land. In the words of Lal Mohammed, a tea shop owner of Dharmaram, 'land ceilings have not come to our village, they have stopped at Karimnagar.' About 9 km from Dharmaram, along a kuccha road, lies Khila Wanaparti, a medium-sized village. The landlords of this village are also velamas, with many of them being relatives of Damodar Rao. One of them is the police patel (*mansab*) of the village. He and his brother together own about a hundred acres of land. Their farm-servants, Narsaiah and Pochamallu, had also been leaders of the Sangham of the village; the movement was new to the village and revolutionary ideology had not struck roots there. Narsaiah and Pochamallu were, therefore, ideal candidates for conspiring to trap Devender Reddy. They brought him to the village on the pretext of wanting to discuss their resignation from the Sangham with him, and subsequently informed the police about his presence in the village. Prakash Reddy then came to the village at dusk and approached Narsaiah's hut, where his prey was talking to some people. Warned about his arrival, Devender Reddy attempted to run away, but he was overpowered from behind and killed. The story that his own revolver went off during the scuffle and killed him is obvious nonsense. With the increasing clamour of civil liberties groups about bogus encounters, the police have changed their stance; they no longer even claim to have killed in self-defence, but these days the deaths are said to be 'accidental'. And perhaps soon they will become 'voluntary'!

Anyway, apart from the sub-inspector, the only people prepared to support the story (at the executive magistrate's enquiry) were the conspirators, Narsaiah and Pochamallu; and the story of the latter was so unbelievable that the executive magistrate was himself constrained to comment that Pochamallu was lying. He was supposed to have been running ahead of Devender Reddy, but his statement corroborates in full detail the sub-inspector's version of what happened behind his back. The people of the village know the truth but they refuse to tell it even to sympathetic civil liberties organisations, let alone to the enquiring magistrate. Such is the terror created by the sub-inspector-on-special-duty, Prakash Reddy.

'Forever Disturbed' Peasant Struggle of Sircilla-Vemulawada

EPW, 27 November 1982

The slogan, 'Revoke the disturbed areas proclamation in Sircilla and Jagtial!' is found splattered on the walls of Telangana towns. What used to be Sircilla (pronounced Sirsilla) at the time of the 'Disturbed Areas' proclamation in October 1978 has subsequently been cut into two talukas, Sircilla and Vemulawada, so that Vemulawada was, so to speak, born a 'disturbed area'. The bifurcating line between the two talukas is the Karimnagar–Kamareddy road, with Vemulawada lying to the north of the road and Sircilla to the south. Together, they occupy the southwest corner of Karimnagar district.

The academics are yet to notice the Karimnagar peasant struggle, but when they do, they will no doubt be impressed by the fact that it was also in the 1970s that the Pochampad project on the Godavari river started watering substantial parts of Karimnagar. Fitting in well as this does with popular academics' theories of peasant struggles (built around the irrigation–capital penetration–differentiation syndrome), this will no doubt spawn rich-peasant theories *a la* Barry Pavier.[1] The latter managed to read the Telangana peasant uprising of the latter half of the 1940s as a peanut and castor revolution, riding the ebb and flow of the lubrication needs of European army and industry.

[1] Author of *The Telangana Movement, 1944–51* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1981).

However, a slight difficulty which academics with a capital-penetration hang-up would face is that while the canal passes through the northern talukas of the district, the struggle started in the Sircilla–Vemulawada region. Further, the struggle commenced not in the partly rice-cultivating Sircilla half, which is at least fractionally watered by the forty-year-old Upper Manair project on the Manair, a tributary of the Godavari river, but in the predominantly jowar- and maize-cultivating shrub-forest region of Vemulawada. This September, about eight weeks prior to the *kharif* harvest, Vemulawada presents a desolate picture (even allowing for the unusual drought) of bushes and rocky soil, dotted with tall stalks and maize and jowar.

An objective reading of the actual situation indicates that it was the penetration not of capital but of communist cadres that sparked off the struggle. The old taluka of Sircilla was, in fact, among the few areas of Karimnagar district to be involved in the militant peasant uprising of the 1940s. A guerrilla squad's raid on the Sircilla police station on 10 June 1950 is recounted by P. Sundarayya (in his *Telangana People's Struggle and its Lessons*)[2] as a turning point, which led to a militant mass uprising against feudal oppression and the state's foodgrain levy in many villages of Karimnagar district. As a solitary relic of those heroic days, Sircilla sends a CPI legislator, Ch. Rajeswara Rao—not to be confused with the general secretary of the party—to the Andhra Pradesh assembly. But the present struggle can be regarded as a revival of the old militancy only in a symbolic sense. For at the time of the 1964 split, all the leaders (and hence also the cadres) of Karimnagar district stayed with the CPI, the lone exception being a brief adventure by Baddam Yella Reddy who was with the CPI(M) for three months before scuttling back to the CPI. Consequently, when the revolutionary communists came out of the CPI(M) after 1967, in Karimnagar, there was nobody to come out and nothing to come out from. Those leading the present movement were political greenhorns in 1970, who have grown with the movements, so much so that only a few of the revolutionary communist leaders of Karimnagar have crossed thirty years of age.

The Beginning

The revolutionaries entered the north-western part of old Sircilla (the western part of present Vemulawada) in 1970–71, from Nizamabad district, crossing a range of what might pass for hills in the eyes of a midget. They

[2] First published in 1972 on behalf of the CPI(M), this book was reissued in 2006 by Foundation Books, New Delhi, on behalf of Sundarayya Vignana Kendram, Hyderabad.

were, apparently, impelled by nothing more material than The Spring Thunder[3] of 1967, abetted by repression in the Armoor taluka of Nizamabad, where they had been working till then. What they encountered in Sircilla was a dry shrub-forest region and villages dominated by archetypal feudalism of Asafjahi[4] vintage. True, the doras (lords) were no longer deshmukhs or jagirdars, but they were little different in substance.

Until the declaration of the Emergency,[5] the struggle was mainly concentrated in a few villages with Nimmapally, Konaraopet and Veernapally being at the centre stage. In Nimmapally, the dora was Bontala Bhaskara Rao, who is said to have owned 1,600 acres of land. In this as well as in dozens of other cases of doras whose landholding acreage runs into monstrous figures, the allegation looks hardly credible until one realises that the ownership is neither legal nor even *benami*, but rather that he exercises his domination over large areas of common village land, forest land, shrub land, tank-beds and stream-beds, land not recorded in anybody's name, and even uncultivable wasteland. This is not because he gets any profit out of it but because it helps him to prevent the poor and not-so-poor people in the village from gaining access to it. In other words, his ownership of land represents an exercise of feudal authority par excellence, and not ownership in the strict (that is, bourgeois) sense.

At some point of time in the 1950s, Bhaskara Rao's father or grandfather had given 22 acres of 'his' land to some harijan families; the reason is said to be his desire to be on good terms with the working people of the village in the aftermath of the armed peasant uprising. It needs to be added that Sundarayya refers to this village Nimmapally (as also Veernapally) as a 'communist stronghold' in those days. But in the 1970s, these twenty-two acres, by a stroke of good fortune, came under a small project on a stream called Mulavagu—completed in 1978—which was expected to water about 2,500 acres of land. Consequently, Bhaskara Rao wanted the land back and evicted the harijan families. They approached the party—later to become the CPI(ML) led by Chandra Pulla Reddy—which had by that

[3] Following the outbreak of a left-wing peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a village in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, in March 1967, Radio Peking called it 'The Spring Thunder' on 28 June 1967.

[4] The Asafjahi dynasty was founded in 1720 by Mir Qamar-ud-Din Siddiqi, a viceroy of the Deccan under the Mughal emperors from 1713 to 1721. It ended on 17 September 1948.

[5] Emergency in India was imposed on 25 June 1975 for a twenty-one-month period when president Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, upon advice from prime minister Indira Gandhi, declared a state of Emergency under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution, suspending elections and civil liberties.

time started propaganda activities in some neighbouring villages. By 1973, Rytu Coolie Sanghams (unions of peasants and agricultural labourers) were formed in Nimmapally, Konaraopet and Veernapally. The local Sangham gave a call to the harijans to occupy the twenty-two acres of land and plant it with sesamum. The dora hired goondas to attack the harijans, who were forced to retreat. The next year, people from the three villages were mobilised to occupy the land, and in the conflict that ensued, the police entered, set up camps in the three villages, and booked a large number of people under the Sircilla Conspiracy Case. Those were the days when conspiracy cases were in fashion with the police; since most of these cases have been dismissed by the courts, the police seem to have lately lost some of their enthusiasm for them. This case was also subsequently withdrawn for lack of evidence, but meanwhile the twenty-two acres of land was reverted to the dora.

What is worth recording is not the details of feudal oppression and resistance (which recur monotonously from village to village) but the strategy and tactics developed by the people, particularly under conditions of repression. Since the days of the Nimmapally struggle, they have adopted the tactics that in times of repression, 'expansion is the main form of resistance, followed by consolidation in the areas of expansion'. Repression in Nimmapally led to expansion to neighbouring villages, followed by consolidation in the form of developing struggles on other issues—beedi-leaf picking, wages of agricultural labourers and farm-servants, rural administrative corruption, etc. Between the two aborted attempts to occupy the twenty-two acres of land described above (in 1973 and 1974), the movement spread among students and youth in the Sircilla and Vemulawada towns, and the Nimmapally struggle was publicised through a play called 'Naandi' (Prologue). The protagonists of the movement also took up the beedi-leaf struggle as part of the 'expansion and consolidation' tactics. The beedi-leaf struggle has actually been a perennial affair ever since the revolutionary communists started organising the tribals and other working people in the Godavari valley region (that is to say, since the early 1970s); and though the Vemulawada shrub-forest is not part of the Godavari valley forest, the beedi-leaf struggle there has been very much part of the general struggle.

Every year, before the summer sets in, the beedi-leaf (called *tuniki* leaf) is ready for picking. Since that period is a lean season for agriculture, picking the leaf is a source of much-needed income for the landless and poor peasants. Earlier, they used to pick the leaf and sell it to contractors (called *guttedars*) at the rate of two or three paise per bundle of one hundred

leaves. The sale would take place at the village kalla, where the contractor's agent (kalledar) would buy it. It is typical of the feudal atmosphere prevalent in the area that even in this seemingly 'businesslike' transaction, the contractor would extract 'unpaid' labour; one or two out of every ten bundles or so would be taken 'free' in the name of various deities, and the first bundle of the day brought to the kalla by a labourer would be taken 'free' as an auspicious omen.

The Sanghams took up the struggle to end these feudal practices and increase payment for the beedi-leaf. It led to a quick reaction from the government, which nationalised the trade to save the contractors. The action is actually a test case of nationalisation being used to save the private sector, for the government did not set up either cooperatives or a public sector corporation to procure the beedi-leaf, but instead undertook to buy the leaf from the pickers (and thereby bear the brunt of their agitation), and subsequently sell it to the contractors who would additionally pay royalty corresponding to the amount purchased. Even here, the government has not deputed the Forest Department to make the purchase but allows the contractors' agents (the kalledars) to directly purchase the leaf, and even advances them finance for the purpose. Indeed, the only effect of the nationalisation has been, on the one hand, to make the Forest Department bear the brunt of the pickers' agitation, allowing the contractors to sit pretty, and on the other, to make room for plenty of corruption. For the present, the contractors, in league with the forest officials, understate the amount of leaf purchased and make a killing in the royalty thus saved. The bribes paid by the beedi-leaf *guttedar*s to the district forest officials is estimated to run into tens of thousands of rupees per season.

The beedi-leaf struggle is a story by itself, but its relevance to the Sircilla story is that in times of severe repression during the anti-feudal struggle, it has served as a medium for the tactics of 'resistance through expansion and consolidation'. In 1975, the Sangham was again active in Nimmapally, this time with a programme of picking the tamarind crop on the disputed twenty-two acres of land. Bhaskara Rao fenced the land and got the tamarind trees painted with a white band, signifying his proprietorship. The harijans removed the fence, painted the bands red, and declared that the land and crops were theirs.

This move resulted in further repression, but by this time, the tactics of resistance through expansion had paid dividends, and the people were not deterred. Soon, however, Emergency was proclaimed, and the entire movement met with a setback. But in the meantime, the movement had, in the process of consolidating the expansion, taken up concrete struggles in most of the villages of the area against feudal oppression, and hence could go into hibernation while awaiting the lifting of the Emergency.

Struggle Against Feudal Oppression

While the movement went into hibernation in the Nimmapally area, once again, the tactics of 'resistance through expansion' were adopted, and the protagonists of the movement moved down to the south of the Karimnagar–Kamareddy road into the western part of the present Sircilla taluka. Their predicament was that they could no longer function in the name of the Rytu Coolie Sangham (let alone the party), but in this area, they found a situation that they could utilise. About thirty to forty villages of this area, covering about 17,000 acres of land, are watered by the Upper Manair project. Even before the Emergency, there had been a 'harijan movement' in the area against untouchability and for securing higher pay for farm-servants. An equally important cause was to resist the feudal habit of people getting their feuds settled by the dora (which, apart from reinforcing his authority, entails that both parties give gifts to the dora, and has always been one of the principal modes of oppression in feudal Telangana). A Harijan Sangham had been formed to fight for these causes by two harijan farm-servants, Ramulu of Gudem and Mallaiah of Cheekodu. They built their struggle around the demand for implementing Indira Gandhi's notorious twenty-point programme (it is not clear whether this was out of cunning or ingeniousness). The revolutionary refugees from Nimmapally joined this Harijan Sangham and for quite some time did not reveal their difference of ideology; instead, as long as the Emergency lasted, they would express their demands in the language of the twenty-point programme. But slowly, they started changing the nature of the Harijan Sangham and by the end of the Emergency, it was replaced by the Rytu Coolie Sangham. Both Ramulu and Mallaiah are today members of the CPI(ML), though their language (as that of practically all the activists of this area) betrays their caste-struggle origins; while the activists of other areas refer to their oppressors as dora (lord) or *bhuswami* (landlord), the activists of this area often slip into the old habit of referring to them as 'those reddys and raos' (rao refers to the velama caste, though not every rao need be a velama.)

A village-by-village account of the oppression and struggles would be monotonous if it were brief, and unwieldy if it were sufficiently elaborate to capture the variations from village to village. The struggle was mainly aimed against feudal social oppression, which takes on a fantastic variety of forms in Telangana. Vetti or vettichakiri (*begar* or unpaid labour in Hindi) in all its myriad manifestations is the most striking characteristic of

feudalism in Telangana. It is not only the peasants who perform unpaid productive labour in the fields of the doras, but the working people of all castes have to do vetti. For instance, toddy-tappers have to provide free toddy, potters have to provide pots free, and so on, right through the caste structure. Some of the castes (dhobis, barbers, etc) even have to perform vetti household labour unrelated to their caste occupation. More generally, any object (whether human or otherwise) that happens to catch the dora's fancy is his for the asking and taking.

It was against this vetti that the first struggle of the erstwhile Harijan Sangham had started in Gudem; and one major struggle was to put an end to the practice of shepherds (members of the golla caste) being forced to give 'free' sheep and goats to the doras. Apart from ritual gifts of sheep (on festival days such as Dasara), a certain number, often running to thirty to forty per village, had to be given annually. Another peculiar form of vetti, which is particularly important in the irrigated and paddy-cultivating regions such as the cluster of villages under the Upper Manair project, is that of forced and unpaid fertilisation: during the fallow period prior to the sowing of the kharif crop, the doras demand that the sheep of all the gollas in the village should spend the nights in their lands and fertilise it. This is called vettimandalu (*mandalu* is plural for *manda*, meaning flock). Usually the doras' demand would run into two to three months per year, and as the peasants put it, 'What can't you grow on the land after that?' There is the interesting case of a seemingly 'modern' landlord, Madhava Rao of Pothur, who uses this feudal authority to claim vettimandalu for more than six months in a year and thereafter grows high-yield varieties of rice to such effect that he has received the district award for 'enterprising farmers'! In fact, the issues of forced 'gifts' of sheep and forced fertilisation of land appear to have been among the principal points of the Sircilla struggle, which is natural, considering that in a predominantly shrub country, rearing sheep is one of the few remunerative activities. The struggle against forced gifts of sheep is aimed not only at the landlords but also against forest officials, right down to the chowkidars. They do not collect fines for grazing sheep on forest land, but instead demand a 'gift' of a few sheep per year, much in the same way as the landlord demands gifts of sheep in compensation for allowing grazing in 'his' land.

Here is a sample of the severity of the struggle against vetti sheep, though it happened much after the Emergency, during the period 1978–80. The village is Namapuram, and the landlords are reddys. The biggest of them (both named Narayana Reddy) are said to still 'own' about 500 acres of land, including a hundred acres of wasteland. All the landlords together used to demand—and get—forty vetti sheep annually until, in 1978, the shepherds decided to stop allowing this exploitation and refused to give sheep on the occasion of Dasara. Some youth from the landlord families were incensed at this move, and waylaid some shepherds driving back their flocks in the evening and forcibly took some goats. Later, the shepherds went in a group and got the goats back. In 1979, the refusal of the shepherds to give their sheep was repeated during a marriage in a reddy family. Reacting to this, the landlords got hold of some sheep on the pretext that they were grazing on their land and locked them up in a public enclosure. The shepherds took out a procession demanding the release of the sheep and achieved it, but about a month later, when the people of the village went to Sircilla to attend a public meeting, the landlords once again captured the sheep and demanded an amount of Rs 250 as fine; the shepherds paid the fine but did not resume the feudal donation of sheep and goats.

Realising that the people were adamant, the landlords formed a 'Rytu Sangham' to fight the Rytu Coolie Sangham of the people. They brought pliable 'elders' of the golla caste from the neighbouring villages, and forced the local shepherds to accept the settlement of a smaller quantum of gifts: the number of vetti sheep came down from forty to twenty-four, and the shepherds had to pay a fine of Rs 500 to boot. Later during the year, there was a taluka-wide movement against fines (or rather bribes) collected by the Forest Department for grazing sheep on forest land; as part of that, a procession was taken out in Sircilla town, in which the shepherds from Namapuram also participated. Once again, the landlords captured another flock of sheep. The shepherds, under the leadership of the local Sangham, decided to get the animals released by mobilising their caste-fellows from neighbouring villages; accordingly, a hundred people came in a procession and got the sheep released. Subsequently, in 1980, one of the landlords once again refused to allow shepherds to graze their sheep on the land under his occupation and collected Rs 100 as fine; such incidents continue, but they are in the nature of a last flicker, for the abolition of vetti is final.

The protracted nature of this struggle indicates how strongly the feudal practices are entrenched in the region, while at the same time highlighting the basic orientation of the struggle, which is not a conflict between commodity-producing peasant 'enterprise' and land monopoly, but rather between toiling people and their feudal relations, for which land monopoly is merely the underpinning. Wherever land is an issue, the land concerned is neither irrigated land nor dry land suitable for commercial cultivation (and hence coveted by the enterprising peasant), but infertile semi-wasteland, which is nevertheless attractive to the landless because they can grow inferior

varieties of grain on it, and is viewed equally covetously by the landlord because he naturally wishes to ensure that the landless remain so. It is feudal authority, captured perfectly by the Telugu word *pettamdari* that has always been the focus of the peasant struggle in Telangana, irrespective of the peculiar interpretations that may be assigned to them by capital-obsessed observers.

After the Emergency

After the lifting of the Emergency, both the CPI(ML) and the Sanghams started functioning openly. They also extended their operations from the two western pockets to the north-eastern part of the old taluka (the eastern part of present Vemulawada); here, in villages like Nukalamarri, the CPI(ML) had contacts and had run night schools during the Emergency; after 1977, Sanghams were quickly established in a large number of villages of the area. Simultaneously, the old struggle for the 22 acres of harijans' land was again taken up in Nimmapally to the west.

A landmark in the post-Emergency movement is an incident that occurred during a visit by Sharada Mukherjee, the then governor of Andhra Pradesh, to Vemulawada town some time in 1977. The CPI(ML) mobilised a large number of people from all the villages where they were leading struggles, to take out a procession in Vemulawada and submit a representation to the governor. They were, however, prevented from doing so by a contingent of policemen led by a deputy superintendent of police (DSP). The people were so enraged at this that they threatened to throw the DSP into the holy tank of the local temple (Vemulawada is a temple town, proudly described by the locals as 'Dakshina Kasi'); when the DSP was adamant, they were so eager to implement their threat that the leaders of the Sangham had to intervene and save the life of the policeman.

Of course, such heroism had to be punished. Cases were booked against seventy people, and the incident looms large in the story of every village of the eastern part of Vemulawada taluka, wherein the movement entered after the Emergency. The movement here is centred around a few core villages like Nukalamarri, Chekkapally and Kodurupaka. Nukalamarri is dominated by Bhaskara Rao (a landlord owning 150 acres), who is said to be the brother-in-law of the All-India Congress(I) Committee general secretary, Satyanarayana Rao. Chekkapally, on the other hand, is a neighbouring village ruled by Bhagwanta Rao, a particularly atrocious landlord; at Kodurupaka, the dora is Venkatarama Rao, the brother-in-law of Bhagwanta Rao. This trio has been at the centre of a five-year-old struggle in about seventy villages in the area. While Bhaskara Rao refused

to part with ten acres of land to his erstwhile tenant, who claimed it under the state's tenancy legislation, Bhagwanta Rao had the unique distinction of getting all his land tilled and cultivated by vetti; he also had about ten to twenty servants working at his house without payment. Trouble for him started when three of his servants approached the CPI(ML) and started a Sangham in 'his' village. When the fight against him became severe, he used his feudal authority to mobilise some of the people of his village to take out a procession from Vemulawada to Chekkapally, chanting 'Bhagwanta Rao is Bhagawan'; but a counter-procession by the Sangham a couple of days later neutralised the awe that Bhagwanta Rao's procession had generated among the people. An incident that took place during this struggle (and which attracted a certain amount of attention because of the visit of a People's Union for Civil Liberties team from Delhi) was the rape of an elderly woman, Rajavva, by goondas employed by landlord Venkatarama Rao of Kodurupaka village. It was an entirely 'political rape', expressly intended to punish Rajavva for organising a militant Mahila Sangham. The Sircilla movement has seen the birth of such Mahila Sanghams in twenty to twenty-five villages, mostly as a consequence of severe repression, which drove the men away from the village. The latest position is that the case against the goondas of Venkatarama Rao has been dismissed, but Rajavva is full of grit and determination, and is willing to fight to the end.

The 'Disturbed Areas' proclamation has certainly strengthened the hands of the doras, but the backbone of their domination—the feudal pettamdari relations—has been irretrievably broken. It may be much more difficult to wage an open struggle today than it was before 1978, but nevertheless, the situation has undergone a basic transformation. The concrete achievements of the struggle are that the original starting point of the entire movement, the twenty-two acres of land at Nimmapally, has finally been given to the harijans, and the beedi-leaf movement is well organised and today the rate paid to the sellers is ten to twelve paise per bundle, with all the vetti bundles having been abolished. The wages of the agricultural labourers and farm-servants have gone up. Although these issues are perennial and come to the fore twice during each cropping season, that is, at the time of transplanting and of harvesting of the paddy, and assume the form of a massive taluka-wide movement, they get merely passing mention in the conversations of peasant activists, as all their serious attention is fixed on the struggle against feudal pettamdari. Most significantly, vetti has completely vanished and so has the habit of doras of sitting in judgement over village disputes. These last are easy to state, but they imply a total change in the life of rural

Telangana. Most of the doras, including the notorious ones like Bhagwanta Rao of Chekkapally, have sold substantial parts of their land and left their respective villages, and are presently living in Karimnagar or Hyderabad.

The revolutionaries, however, did not give up the struggle lightly. Apart from Rajavva, there are many other women like Lakshmi of Boinpally, who were raped by landlord goondas. Besides Jakkula Elliah of Doomala, who was killed when police fired on a 3,000-strong procession in Sircilla town in January 1980, there were activists like Lakshmirajam of Timmapuram, who were killed by landlords. Indeed it would be absolutely wrong to think that the doras were content with the police help that was liberally given to them before and after the 'Disturbed Areas' proclamation. They were feudal to begin with and feudal till the end. They trained and armed their own gangs to fight the peasants, and regarded the police only as a standby. There is, for example, the case of Jagga Rao of Jogapuram, who got forty swords made specially for arming his gang. Others, under the able leadership of Papa Rao, president of the Vemulawada Samiti (block), train robber gangs to commit thefts in the name of the 'naxalite party' and alienate the people from the CPI(ML). One of the principal activities of the movement, especially after achieving basic victories like the abolition of vetti, and driving away most of the landlords from the villages, is to apprehend these robber gangs and force the police to arrest them (though that takes considerable 'forcing', as can be imagined).

The people's resistance is as varied as their enemy's offensive. The myth of the 'naxalite cult of violence' has been so assiduously cultivated and propagated that some of the forms of violence adopted by them might not actually sound credible. For instance, after the declaration of the region as a 'Disturbed Area', the police took to raiding villages during the night. In order to prevent this, entire villages (barring only the landlords and their henchmen) would stay awake, singing traditional folk or devotional songs, or listening to a Haridas recounting mythological tales. Or else they would sit outside their homes and keep up a massive racket throughout the night beating aluminium plates with ladles or metal tumblers. During the seasonal struggles for higher rates for beedi-leaf and higher wages for paddy transplanting or harvesting, the police were forewarned and moved into the villages in large numbers to ensure that even posters calling for a strike would not be pasted. In some places, the Sanghams adopted an ingenious tactic to counter this: cowherds driving cattle back into the villages at dusk were assigned the duty of pasting posters. They would drive in the cattle in a rush, scatter the police standing in watch by the roadside and paste the posters before the police could recover. Indeed, it should be obvious to anyone not blinded by motivated propaganda that a mass movement cannot but help adopt mass tactics. Similarly, those who routinely complain that Indian communists have taken into cognisance cultural factors that are specific to India like caste would probably like to know (or perhaps not) that one of the strongest weapons in the anti-feudal struggle has always been what they call 'social boycott'. With one of the defining qualities of Hindu dharma being abhorrence of manual labour, the boycott of the household work of landlords by the toiling castes is as powerful a weapon in the anti-feudal struggle as a strike by productive workers is in the struggle against capital. Since the men and women of landlord families do not perform any 'menial' chores, boycott by dhobis, barbers and harijans is often sufficient to bring the landlords down on their knees, and is generally the first tactic employed in most villages. It works particularly well with velama landlords, for they are haughtier than the reddys.

Today, the struggle is characterised by severe repression and greater sophistication of the enemy. It is not just that as a consequence of the struggle 'feudalism has gone and capitalism has come'. As the activists clearly recognise, what has happened is much more complex than that. The doras—those who have not left the villages, that is to say—have changed the more obnoxious of their pettamdari spots, and become more 'democratic' in their outward behaviour. While earlier much of their land used to be cultivated by vetti labour or by 'bonded' farm-servants, or, at best, by rent-paying tenants, today many of them give their land 'for a share'—they get it sharecropped. The share is fifty–fifty, both in terms of costs (on wet land) and produce. They no longer get vetti, but now they extract payment through different means. The various 'development strategies' adopted by the state have given the doras a chance to turn into brokers and exploit the people extensively. Yet they are not ordinary brokers working for a 'normal' commission but take the form of 'village elders', who represent the villagers before the government's development agencies—and graciously accept what are modestly called 'expenses'. This role is, of course, facilitated by the fact that many of them are now chairmen of land mortgage banks and agricultural banks, presidents of cooperative credit societies, and of panchayat *samiti*s, leaders of political parties, and so on. A good example is that of the CPI leader, Ch. Rajeswara Rao,[6] scion of a Desai family, one of whose brothers is vice-president of a district agricultural bank, and another a leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

[6] As of 2011, he is associated with the Telugu Desam Party.

In other words, the essentially patriarchal relation has now been given a new mode of expression. True, this new mode of expression entails a difference in that it splits the toiling people and makes unity of action more difficult than earlier—a variant of the trite observation that 'capital differentiates'. However, today it is not the difficulty entailed in uniting the poor that worries the activists, but the problem of facing police repression, which is so severe that in all but a few villages of the two talukas, it is nearly impossible to even discuss the movement openly with the people.

(*Co-authored with M. Kodandarami Reddy*)

Karamchedu: Second Anniversary

EPW, 15 August 1987

One way of marking history is by the anniversaries of events of injustice, of suppression, of pillage, and of loot. It is certainly more moral than marking history by the anniversaries of coronations; and more rational than marking it by the birth, death, revelation or flight of a prophet.

This year, 17 July marked the second anniversary of an event that has done much to shape political awareness in Andhra Pradesh in recent times: the Karamchedu killings of 1985, when close relatives of the chief minister's son-in-law, Venkateswara Rao, a doctor, led a brutal assault on the madigas of the village, killing six men and raping three girls. The assault was remarkable for its brutality that is not captured by the figures of the casualties: you can knife a man to death, or you can smash his skull with an axe, break his limbs, and dig a spear into his groin. The two are equally effective ways of committing murder, but when the latter is preferred, the choice conveys a message independent of the fact of the killing.

At least 200 'youth' (including some non-youth) participated in the raid, but the police case names just ninety-two; seventy-two of them have been arrested (in most cases, this verb is a euphemism for voluntary surrender by the accused after months of effective evasion and a final guarantee by somebody close to the chief minister that everything would be all right); and the rest are still absconding. Since the landed gentry of Karamchedu have landed relations wherever there are irrigation canals in this state, as

well as in the border districts like Hospet of Karnataka, it is not all that difficult nor financially troublesome to be 'absconding'.

Dalit Mahasabha

The matter would perhaps have ended there had N.T. Rama Rao's stars been brighter. However, things shaped themselves somewhat differently. Protests and protest meetings by civil liberties unions and other democratic organisations sustained the issue for a while, and then there were the Congressmen who regard the life and death of harijans[1] as their private demesne into which upstarts like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had better not intrude. They made a lot of noise, which was reported by the press but were otherwise ineffective since the public has little faith in the bona fides of the Congress. But what really kept the issue alive and made it a thorn in NTR's side was the birth of an organised dalit movement as a consequence of Karamchedu. The Dalit Mahasabha was formed as a direct consequence of the Karamchedu killing, and inaugurated formally at Chirala on 1 September 1985. Its first convention was held at Tenali on 16–17 February 1986 and today it is an active and growing movement.

The movement was fortunate in having, from the very beginning, two leaders who were well known and respected in their own right for many years before Karamchedu. They are Katti Padma Rao and Bojja Tarakam, currently general secretary and president of the Mahasabha, respectively. Padma Rao belongs to the tradition of organised rationalism that has long been a significant movement in South India. Rationalist and atheist associations—for all their dissensions and splits—have a sizeable membership and a larger audience, especially in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. Padma Rao, who teaches Sanskrit (a peculiarly appropriate vocation for a dalit and a rationalist) in a college in Guntur district, is a leading rationalist, and within the rationalist movement, has been a spokesman for the marxist approach to the criticism of religion. Tarakam was even closer to the communist movement, and was for some time an activist of Virasam (Viplava Rachayitula Sangham), the Revolutionary Writers' Association of Andhra Pradesh. As a lawyer, he was active in the civil liberties movement in the state, until he accepted a government pleader's job in 1983 and quit active association with the democratic movement.

Karamchedu brought these two men into the streets. Tarakam resigned his government pleader's job and Padma Rao more or less suspended teaching to settle down at Chirala and organise the victims of the assault, who have refused to go back to the village and have built a colony for themselves at Chirala. Slowly, the protest against the particular assault built itself into the Dalit Mahasabha, whose formation on 1 September was attended by about three lakh dalits and sympathisers. Today, the organisation has active district-level units in the Srikakulam, Visakhapatnam, West Godavari, Guntur, Prakasam and Nellore districts in addition to ad hoc bodies in Hyderabad city and Krishna district. In the Nellore and Srikakulam districts, it even has *mandal*-level units. It has recently started bringing out a fortnightly called *Dalit Sakti.*

Meanwhile, the police, after about a week's initial apathy during which they played genial host to teams of journalists, politicians and others who visited Karamchedu, began arresting, or rather accepting the voluntary surrender of one accused after another. The Crime Branch of the state's Criminal Investigation Department was entrusted with the investigation and they have made up a case against ninety-two persons. With the plea that the accused are very influential people and justice would be difficult to obtain in their native district, the state itself got the case transferred to the sessions court at Guntur, where the accused are perhaps even more influential. One thing that the police have steadfastly refused to consider is the possibility that the chief minister's relatives-by-marriage might be directly involved in the killing or the conspiracy behind the killing. The madigas have said that a conspiracy did take place the previous night in a liquor shop in the village; Venkateswara Rao himself was abroad at that time but the Dalit Mahasabha has alleged that his father, Daggubati Chenchuramaiah,[2] was personally involved in the conspiracy. Since the police have refused to investigate this, and have moreover left out many of the assailants from the list of the accused, the Dalit Mahasabha has filed a private case, in which 140 accused have been named. The preliminary enquiries are over, with ninety-four witnesses having been examined. Of the accused, 104, including Chenchuramaiah, have appeared in court, and the case is ready for registration. For their pains, the Dalit Mahasabha members have been suitably honoured by the state government. A big public meeting of theirs at Vijayawada was brutally lathi-charged on 6 October 1986, and Padma Rao was humiliated by being taken into custody under the National Security Act.

Both with the police case and the private case, the accused—and in collusion with them the state—have been delaying matters as much as

[1] The word 'dalit' was not in vogue then as it is today. In fact, after the Karamchedu killings, the Scheduled Castes insisted that they be addressed not as harijans but as dalits.

[2] He was killed by the CPI(ML) (People's War) in 1989.

possible. Since only seventy-two of the ninety-two accused in the police case have been apprehended, the committal was delayed and was finally done only this year, after the case was split against the 'absconders'. The Dalit Mahasabha has a legitimate complaint here. The families and properties of the twenty absconders are all very much in Karamchedu and very much intact. If a poor man had committed even a small crime—much short of murder and rape—and had absconded for two years, by now, the police would have locked up his entire family, laid his fields waste, plundered his house and forced him to surrender. The Karamchedu absconders are, however, enjoying all the civil liberties that others have been fighting in vain for all these years. Even in the private case, only 104 of the 140 accused have presented themselves in court. Warrants have been issued for the rest but the police either does not or cannot execute them. Meanwhile, the accused have applied for the private case to be transferred to some other court in the district, and as an interim benefit, have got the proceedings stayed.

Even as this is going on, and as the dalits and other democratic forces are getting ready to observe the second anniversary of Karamchedu, NTR goes ahead and makes his son-in-law from the village a cabinet minister! Venkateswara Rao, who was president of the party's youth wing (the party's general secretary is another son-in-law of NTR), was made minister for health just a week before the Karamchedu anniversary.

Neerukonda

The man whom Venkateswara Rao displaced from the cabinet was M.S.S. Koteswara Rao, also a doctor, who had held the health portfolio since the TDP's first victory in 1983. He belongs to Neerukonda, Guntur district, another kamma-dominated tobacco-growing village like Venkateswara Rao's Karamchedu. As if to underline the non-change in the cabinet, a brutal assault on dalits took place at Neerukonda on 15 July 1987, just two days before the second anniversary of Karamchedu. Early in the morning of 15 July, a mob of about 150 youth from the landed families of the kamma caste raided the mala street of the village, went on a rampage with axes, spears and sticks, killing 60-year-old Manne Seshaiah and severely injuring four others. The dozen or so principal assailants were close relatives of Koteswara Rao, even closer than the assailants of Karamchedu had been related to Venkateswara Rao. And the method of assault was ominously similar to that employed in Karamchedu.

The village and its social structure are worth commenting upon, if only because in the unending debate about India's agrarian economy and agrarian struggles, everybody can find support for his favoured theory in this village.

One can find market-oriented agrarian capitalism intensifying class antagonism and sharpening class struggle; alternatively, in the same data, one can see agrarian capital that is not agrarian but bureaucrat in its origin, simultaneously serving the needs of commercial cropping and age-old usury. One can find a situation paradigmatic of caste-struggle theories, with a SC fighting the caste oppression of a Forward Caste, and a Backward Caste (BC) caught between the two getting split neatly into one half that is with the SC and the other half that is with the Forward Caste; alternatively, in the same data, one can find a basic conflict between the labour-exploiting rich landholders and the toilers whose labour is exploited. Caste is used by both as a political instrument, by the former to recruit into its fighting forces relatively smaller landholders, who may have only a marginal economic conflict with the labourers, and by the latter, to mobilise extended sympathy and support going beyond the village, beyond the region, and beyond the specific economic conditions of the conflict. The even split between the two contending parties of the BC can then be seen as proof that the 'caste factor' is actually a class-struggle factor, a political factor.

Unlike Karamchedu, Neerukonda is not a canal-irrigated village. The soil here is, however, rich, and both paddy and tobacco are grown on well-irrigated and rain-fed land. According to the statistics provided by the village sarpanch, there are about 1,500 persons of the kamma caste in the village; most of the kammas are just middle farmers but there are a few families that own above fifty and up to a hundred acres of land. Another 1,800 men, women and children are mala, a Scheduled Caste. Some of the mala families have some land but the large majority of them work as daily wage labourers. Being essentially a rain-irrigated village, Neerukonda cannot provide them sufficient work for sustenance throughout the year, and they, therefore, migrate to the cotton-growing parts of Guntur district when it is time for cotton-picking, a fact that the landed farmers do not like very much. Sandwiched between these two are about 300 persons of a caste that used to be called plain golla at one time but likes to style itself as yadava these days. Regardless of whatever they call themselves, however, they are no longer keepers of milch cattle but middle farmers, poor farmers or labourers. There are other castes in the village but they had no role in the recent conflict.

The wage rate paid to the labourers, as everywhere else in the country, is well below the legal minimum wage. This part of the state is classified as Zone I in the Minimum Wages Schedule, and the minimum wage for agricultural work is Rs 13.20. What the labourers are actually paid in Neerukonda ranges from Rs 5 to Rs 8 for weeding and transplanting paddy,

and Rs 7 for grading tobacco. This much is routine. What is not so common is that the payment of wages for tobacco grading is done not daily at the end of the day's work, but once in a lump sum, after the crop has been marketed and exchanged for cash. Taking the cue from tobacco farming, the same is being done in the case of the women labourers who weed the paddy fields. They are also paid only after the grain has been disposed of in the market. If they go to the farmer's house to demand payment before that, they are abused and physically pushed out.

Somebody may well ask as to whether there are no agricultural co-operative banks in AP, and if they exist, why they do not provide farmers with working capital, *taqavi* or crop loans, precisely for the purpose of purchasing fertiliser, pesticides and labour power. Of course, they do. Taqavi loans,[3] in any case, are as old as the Mughal *padshahi,* and why would a modern welfare state—especially a state with a Green Revolution showpiece region within it—not have agricultural cooperatives? We even had state-wide elections for these bodies at the end of this June and we counted about a dozen fatally broken heads, about three times as many fractured and bleeding limbs, and property worth lakhs of rupees burnt down or otherwise laid waste in what are politely called 'electoral clashes', before the ballot papers were all counted and added up. But what the rich farmers of Neerukonda are doing is to employ these loans—instruments of peasant capitalism for some observers, of Junker capitalism for some others, of a cooperative commonwealth for yet others, and the non-capitalist path of development for the rest—for a very ancient purpose: usury. It is a beautiful system. Landlord A does not pay his labourers their wages daily; the indigent labourers go to landlord B for a loan, and he lends them as much as they need/as much as they are due to pay landlord A, whichever is less, at an interest that ranges from 36 to 60 per cent per annum. He is of course using the crop loan he has taken from the cooperative bank for this purpose. But what do *his* labourers do? They go to landlord C, etc. Since it is a finite circuit, one can close the two ends to get a lovely system whereby (at least in theory) *all* the farmers use *all* their crop loan for usurious purposes, and yet agricultural development in the form of cultivation of export-grade tobacco goes on unimpaired, anti-imperialism thrives with the export of the tobacco to the Soviet Union, and the cooperative movement flourishes, broken heads, bleeding limbs and all.

[3] Murshid Quli Khan (1717–27), the ruler of Bengal and Orissa, introduced the practice of giving taqavi or crop loans to tenants.

The upshot of this system is that most of the labourers are indebted to the landlords, with some of them owing Rs 1,000, some more and some less. This indebtedness gives them a sense of helplessness and insecurity. The assault of 15 July was the sixth one since the panchayat elections of 1981, and each time the malas have just taken the beating lying down without retaliation. As the perpetrators of the previous assaults employed only sticks, there were no casualties. But this time, undoubtedly under the influence of Karamchedu, the assailants used axes and spears, and the result was much more serious.

Until 1981, the village was 'peaceful' in the sense that the gentry decided what was good for everybody and the others obeyed. In spite of some communist influence among the labourers until the early 1960s, the village was a 'Congress village'. In 1981, elections to the gram panchayats were held for the first time after many years, and the malas were bold enough to set up a candidate of their own. They lost, but the village was never the same again. With the formation of the TDP in 1983, most of the kamma farmers turned to it, and one of their men even became a minister; during the first elections, the majority of the malas also voted for the new party, but quite a few of them did not, which hurt the egos of the landlords. They started taunting the malas and the latter reacted by turning further away from the TDP. Pretty soon, clashes between the mala labourers and the kamma landholders started erupting regularly, with the yadavas being split between the two. Since the immediate flashpoint in most of the clashes was the organisation of processions by the malas in the caste-Hindu areas of the village, the 'elders' of this and the neighbouring villages evolved an 'agreement' whereby the malas' processions would confine themselves to their own street, and the others would restrict themselves to their part of the village. This seemingly equitable agreement actually means that the malas should stick to just one street whereas the others can go around the rest of the village; and in any case, the agreement is tantamount to the practice of untouchability; specifically, it is a crime under Sections 4(iv) and 4(x) of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. Yet it has been in force for six years in the native village of NTR's health minister!

Meaningless Judicial Enquiry

Early this July, NTR dropped this health minister from his cabinet (for reasons in no way connected, needless to add, with the practice of untouchability in his native village) and gave that post to his son-in-law from Karamchedu; it is alleged by the TDP that upon hearing of the change, the malas of Neerukonda celebrated by breaking coconuts as an offering

to God (the offering was made in the local church, by the way, with most of the malas being Christians!). The malas deny this half-heartedly, since the celebration—like that of Sikhs offering sweets upon Indira Gandhi's death—has been converted into an excuse to justify the assault of 15 July. It may be presumed that they *did* celebrate, and why not? This celebration, real or imaginary, rankled with the ex-minister's men and they were waiting for an occasion to take revenge. The occasion came in the form of a violation of the old agreement, when a marriage procession of the malas went into the caste-Hindu areas of the village.

On the evening of 14 July, the kamma youth warned the malas, saying, 'Tomorrow you will get it.' Such warnings issued before assaults were so common that the malas took it in their stride, much as peasants in a flood-prone area take the devastation in their stride, as part of life's burden. Some of them left the village early the next morning, but others stayed on, thinking that they would take the beating, get the wounds dressed and carry on with their chores. Not only these labourers, but the sub-inspector (SI) of police, Mangalagiri, also took the rumour casually. His police station is accustomed to visiting the village after each assault, and booking a case, not of assault and attempt to murder against the assailants, but an equitable case of rioting on an equal number of persons from both sides. On the morning of 15 July, the SI came casually to the village, presumably in the hope that the ugly business would be over and he could write down his First Information Report (FIR) and go back. To his horror, he discovered that this time the assailants had behaved untraditionally and had used axes and spears in addition to sticks; they had already murdered 60-year-old Manne Seshaiah and were chasing some others across the fields. Seshaiah was killed most brutally. He was returning after answering a call of nature when he saw the assailants on the rampage. He took refuge in the house of a yadava. That man's daughter Mariamma, a young girl barely in her teens, barred the door with her outstretched arms when the assailants came and pleaded with them to spare 'grandpa' as she was accustomed to calling Seshaiah. The assailants pulled her aside, smashed open the door, and axed and speared Seshaiah to death. The other four victims, Bejjam Devaratnam (40), Sikha Nageswara Rao (45), Chukka Veeraswamy (35) and Korra Rosaiah (22) were caught in the fields and severely injured. They will take a long time to recover. The SI should perhaps be given credit for the fact that after recovering from the initial surprise at the unexpected brutality of the attack, he took the injured men immediately to hospital, and thereby at least saved a couple of lives. He may have been a bad policeman, but he was at least a good boy scout!

The investigation, however, has proceeded most tardily; the first two men arrested by the police were a yadava, who was involved along with the kammas in the attack, and a dhobi, who had nothing at all to do with the attack. The real assailants were not apprehended by the police until they themselves decided to surrender. For the first few days, they hid in a neighbouring village at night and came home during daytime; on the way, they would hoot at and threaten any of the malas they saw. But in spite of the heavy presence of policemen in the village, they were not apprehended. Instead the police, as at Karamchedu two years ago, played host to the visitors who arrived in droves—civil liberties teams, Dalit Mahasabha leaders, opposition leaders, and, of course, a lot of gleeful Congressmen who have never had it so good, with all these attacks upon harijans in the villages of TDP ministers.

And now the routine starts. NTR's first reaction was to announce a judicial enquiry, which was the most meaningless thing to do since the victims had already given a detailed list of the assailants and all that needed to be done was to hunt for them—for which purpose trained police dogs were certainly more appropriate than retired judges. The FIR, anyway, mentions seventeen persons by name and more than a hundred unidentified assailants. Perhaps because of the widespread protest, they have not yet made it a case of rioting as in the past. We should emphasise the *yet,* for the sarpanch of the village has started floating a possible amendment, in the form of a widely circulated cyclostyled letter alleging that it was the malas in collusion with some yadavas who had planned and assaulted the kammas, and what the kammas did was to drive them back into the malas' street; he even has the audacity to add that when they were chasing the malas back, the mala women pleaded with them to desist, and they obliged; and further that Manne Seshaiah pleaded with them not to attack him since he was not a party to the conflict and they magnanimously spared him; but just then 'somebody' assaulted Seshaiah from behind and killed him. The tone of the document clearly suggests that the 'somebody' was a harijan, and that Seshaiah, an expendable old man, was killed so that the blame could be assigned to the minister and his people. It remains to be seen how long the state will take to add this version on to the real story and make an even-handed case of rioting out of the assault.

'Law and Order' on Lease

EPW, 17 June 1989

Privatisation of one kind—the opening up of the economy to foreign and native private capital—is very much in the news today. It is being discussed, admired, derided and condemned, and either way, it is Rajiv Gandhi and his man Pitroda[1] who are being held responsible for it. But it appears that the spirit of *laissez-faire* has infected the world in this, the late part of the twentieth century, and Pitroda alone cannot be blamed for it; witness the ridiculous naïveté with which Gorbachev[2] is rediscovering the virtues of the market; or witness our own N.T. Rama Rao (NTR).

An advertisement, designed to look like a circus poster, was placed by the government of Andhra Pradesh in the *Indian Express* dated 29 April. The policy, whose philosophical masthead proclaims that 'to an extremist a weapon implies destruction; to a law-abiding citizen, a means of protection' and whose objective is to 'ensure that individuals defend themselves, their families and their villages' from anti-social elements, envisages the setting up of a village self-protection committee (Grama Swayam Samrakshana Samiti), consisting of five individuals in each village.

[1] Sam Pitroda, then adviser to former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Since 2010, he has been chairperson of the National Knowledge Commission.

[2] Mikhail Gorbachev, the seventh and last general secretary (1985–91) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was the last head of state of the USSR (1988–91) until its collapse.

They will be chosen by the government on the basis of their education, integrity, moral character and commitment to social service. One position, however, is reserved for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and minorities (put together!). The president and vice-president of the committee will be given licences to purchase and hold arms (which automatically rules out any poor person, even if education and integrity do not, as the cheapest revolver costs Rs 12,000). The duties of the committee are: (a) to keep vigil on the activities of those who violate excise and commercial tax laws and indulge in offences relating to forests, civil supplies, etc, and report them to higher authorities; (b) to patrol the village to prevent the commission of offences; (c) to assist the police in the apprehension of offenders and in the prevention of crime; and (d) to pass on information to the police about the occurrence of any crime, or any apprehension of breach of peace.

If separated from its preamble, the policy can only seem to be a gratuitous condemnation of the Andhra Pradesh police, for it reads like an SOS to the citizens to save themselves from the inefficacy of the police. The preamble, however, is a story by itself. It goes back to the days when the Congress ruled the Telugu people, and when political leaders and police officers frequently mooted the idea of forming village self-protection committees against the naxalites. With the evolution of the Congress as an opposition party—which must be more loyal to the ruling classes than the party in power, for it has a failure to live down—a competitive clamour was set up, and joined on occasion by the lesser parties in the assembly, in particular the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Since the year 1985—when the current brutal repression on the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) groups began—there have been many inconclusive debates in the assembly about the necessity, advisability and constitutionality of such committees. Perhaps none of them was very serious, and the discussion was only meant as an act of faith on behalf of their constituents, for all the violence that they wanted to be perpetrated was being perpetrated anyway.

Without the need of any declared official policy, landlords—especially in the velama-dominated talukas of Karimnagar—were given liberal arms licences, and have been using them liberally against the masses and their activists. And more importantly, the police have always been there, supplied the activists with arms and infrastructure of increasing sophistication, and a licence that is increasingly free. No formal policy or structure of village self-protection was felt necessary then, for more than one reason: anything done to suppress 'extremism' was, in any case, legitimate in the eyes of articulate public opinion, and there was no need to borrow the statutory

legitimacy that comes with a formal structure or the ideological legitimacy of protecting 'self, family and village'. Secondly, the armed strength of the enemy in those days consisted mainly of poor peasant youth carrying the most archaic weapons imaginable (and even taking pride in that), and it is only now that the transmutation to a better organised, better equipped and ruthlessly efficient force is taking place. Thirdly, in those days, the 'problem', though by no means very slight, was nevertheless not yet a problem for the most articulate and influential sections of the regional elite, being confined as it was mainly to landlords of pre–Green Revolution vintage plus forest contractors. Though the awareness that it *could* spread to other areas if left unattended was there, not much urgency was attached to it. Fourthly, the 'problem' was as yet not compounded by a generalised increase in the self-assertion of the poor, or the decreasing possibility of democratic governance, or the increasing intra-ruling class violence.

In other words, what has given operational seriousness to the decade-old demand for arming 'villages' against naxalites is a combination of better-organised strength of the naxalites, and a certain generalisation of the problem. The generalisation consists of three dimensions. The first is the growing tendency of the poor even in areas not 'infected by extremism' to resist oppression, in some cases without any conceptualised identity, and in some cases with a 'dalit' identity. The second dimension is the growing need to generally suppress the poor, partly as an aspect of the ongoing fascisation of the Indian polity, partly as a necessary concomitant of the consolidation and entrenchment of the power of diverse sections of the ruling classes in conflict with each other, and partly as an inevitable consequence of the severe economic crisis which makes it impossible to meet even the slightest of their aspirations. The third and final dimension is the replacement of political manipulation, accommodation and appeasement with violence in the internal squabbles of the propertied classes.

Immediate Provocation

The immediate provocation for the recent decision, a murder that took place at Karamchedu on the night of 6 April, testifies to all the above dimensions. The victim was Daggubati Chenchuramaiah, father of NTR's currently most influential son-in-law, D. Venkateswara Rao. A group of unfamiliar youth accosted him at his home, on the plea of seeking his help in getting a job, and after coming close to him, shot him dead point-blank and went away shouting pro-naxalite slogans. They have neither been identified nor apprehended till now, but a new (probably non-existent) dalit organisation immediately claimed responsibility for the murder, and said that the murder was committed in retaliation to the Karamchedu killings of 17 July 1985. However, a day later, a statement issued by the People's War Group of the CPI(ML) claimed that it was *they* who were responsible for the deed.

The killing occasioned more surprise than shock, for the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha, which has been spearheading the protest movement of the victims of Karamchedu—and has filed a private complaint implicating Chenchuramaiah as the first accused—is an organisation avowedly disinclined to violence, and none of the naxalites has ever had more than a nominal presence in the area. Nevertheless, the administration has reacted with uncharacteristic calm. It knows perfectly well that whoever may have been the killers, and however limited their local mass base, any hasty action in retaliation would have unpleasant consequences. The Karamchedu killing was followed by such a tardy investigation and such an unsatisfactory charge sheet that the Dalit Mahasabha was forced to file a private complaint implicating all the influential and powerful persons left out in the police charge sheet. But nearly four years later, the trial is yet to start. It has been delayed by such vexatious means that it would be tiresome to recapitulate them. Meanwhile, the killings have continued. After Karamchedu, fatal assaults on dalits have taken place in the villages of Neerukonda (Guntur district), Dontali (Nellore district), Gudiada (Vizianagaram district), Bandlapalli (Chittoor district), Kollipara (Guntur district) and Jabbargudem (Ranga Reddy district). In most of these cases, behind the seemingly local tensions of wages, land and electoral conflict can be clearly discerned a certain process of consolidation and entrenchment of the land- and business-based regional elite, whose political strategy is to consolidate an obedient village community behind it in its struggle with monopoly capital. This murderous politics has created such an aversion among the democratic masses that even ruling class spokespersons are wary of expressing anything more than routine shock and condemnation of Chenchuramaiah's murder.

The fact that the murder was avowedly committed by a naxalite group came in handy for NTR. This is perhaps the first murder committed in many years by any naxalite group in the paddy–tobacco–cotton belt of coastal AP, the social hinterland of NTR's politics, and the victim was not anybody but a close relative-by-marriage of the chief minister. The murder has undoubtedly delivered a much-needed shock to the landed gentry of coastal AP, who have been continuing their assaults on the poor in utter contempt of all peaceful protests. On the other hand, if the killers had not been naxalites, it is doubtful that NTR would have found it possible to make an excuse of formulating a policy of creating armed self-defence

squads constituted by persons chosen by the government, and if he did, he would have found it difficult to legitimise it. But now he can do it in the name of 'extremist violence', for the killing of poor people in the name of curbing 'extremism' has long been legitimised in this state, and even those who are otherwise democratic do not protest much about it. Since coming to power, NTR has already killed about 180 naxalite cadres and sympathisers in 'encounters', with almost all of them being peasants or tribal youth, and very few people have spoken out against this record. He can now use this pre-existing legitimacy to justify his policy of arming dominant landholders with firearms and policing powers, an act that can have devastating consequences for the oppressed classes, especially outside the 'extremist-infested' north Telangana districts, for outside these five districts, the poor are in no position to resist or take on armed attacks from the landlords. But since control of the rural masses is an essential part of NTR's politics, he must be only too happy that he can legitimately proceed with the scheme.

In a different political dimension, the landlords of the north Telangana districts are also in dire need of more arms to fight the naxalites whose strength is, by all accounts, increasing in spite of the endless 'encounter' killings; and NTR has, no doubt, been wistfully admiring licentious Bihar, wherein the government is free to allow landlords to maintain their own private armies. Presumably, now some of the landlords of Warangal and Karimnagar will form themselves into village self-protection committees and inflict violence upon the peasants and labourers. But the principal agency of anti-naxalite operations will, however, continue to be the special police, recently consolidated as a Special Task Force armed with anonymity and automatic weapons, and commanded by the most notorious and powerful policeman in the state, deputy inspector general of police, K.S. Vyas. The kind of arms and organisation that the naxalite groups have built up in recent years put them beyond the range of private armies.

Congress' Response

The Congressmen have a very different reason for being upset over NTR's scheme. The Congress is presently engaged in a serious conflict with parties like the TDP in trying to win over the loyalty of the rural rich. It is a vulgar understanding that sees the Congress as a representative of monopoly capital as against parties like the TDP, which represent the regional elite. Irrespective of whichever class may at present dominate this or that political formation, and whatever may be the self-perceptions of those classes and formations, the fact is that the Congress represents a certain paradigm, a certain model for the resolution of the question of balancing the interests of the various sections of the ruling classes, and formations like the TDP represent not so much a different paradigm as a temporary phase of self-assertion of the regional elite in the process of consolidation and definition of a new paradigm. While the TDP, therefore, asserts the power of the rural rich by acting as the political vehicle through which the latter suppress the rural masses and force the 'village' to fall in line behind them, the Congress tries to attract the very same rural rich by wooing them through measures like the Panchayati Raj Bill. In the process, violent clashes between the two formations continue to take place, resulting in frequent incidents of booth-capturing, rigging, rioting, arson and murder. As the general elections approach, the violence increases in proportion. It is against this background that Congressmen are agitated over the village self-protection scheme, for as they have been unabashedly saying, they are afraid that all the arms licences would go to the TDP men, who are going to use them to rig the coming elections. One Congressman from Guntur—the district which has seen the most violent Congress–TDP clashes, especially in the constituency of the previous home minister—has even gone to court challenging the constitutionality of the scheme.

The court will probably hold the scheme unconstitutional, at least in its present form. Self-defence as an exceptional plea taken by a person who has caused injury to another is recognised by law, but that is a very different thing from the state going around forming armed squads of persons chosen by it and delegating policing powers to them. NTR bemoans that in the good old days, villages used to have self-protection committees consisting of respectable inhabitants, a habit that has unaccountably died out in recent times, and hence claims, in justification of his scheme, that he is only reviving an ancient institution. Meanwhile, however, much to NTR's chagrin and misfortune, the country has acquired a modern Constitution and rudimentary notions of rule of law, which must be formally adhered to. And quite apart from the fact that persons of 'good conduct, education, integrity and commitment to social service', who have enough cash to purchase a revolver, can only belong to the landholding classes, it is doubtful that Article 21, as it is presently interpreted, would accept the leasing out of the job of policing to private parties, rich or poor. Informing the police and keeping vigil over the violation of excise and civil supplies laws is alright, and no smuggler has ever been hurt by vigilance in any case, but the power to patrol the village with arms to prevent the commission of offences is a different thing altogether. On the one hand, and as it is, most of the offences that the official police commit are during the purported

prevention of other people's offences, and secondly the term 'offence' as classified by the Indian Penal Code and other penal laws is a dangerously vague thing. A landlord given policing powers may very well decide that it is breach of peace if his labourers strike work and gherao him, and may set about preventing it through the use of firearms. Or a poor woman gathering firewood from the village wasteland, a peasant catching fish in a tank or stream auctioned by the gram panchayat to a contractor, a landless family ploughing unused common land or putting up a hut on it, peasants abusing a corrupt revenue official or belabouring an extortionate electricity supervisor, are all guilty of offences like theft, encroachment, intimidation and assault. Imagine the consequence of giving the rural gentry licences for firearms, and the authority to prevent such 'offences' and apprehend the offenders!

III

Understanding the Caste-Class Nexus

Rayalaseema

Waiting for a Rshyasrnga[1]

EPW, 31 May 1986

'Roads indicate culture', says a dubious maxim inscribed by the Public Works Department on a roadside stone slab in Anantapur district. However, though 'culture' is not precisely what is indicated, the epigram is perhaps unintendedly apt, for the road in question leads to Bellary in Karnataka, and it is along this road that thousands of indigent labourers from Anantapur have trudged to reach the canal-irrigated lands of Bellary, and seek work and sustenance there. The cotton-growing black soil of Bellary under the Tungabhadra project, which has been colonised by enterprising kamma cultivators from coastal Andhra Pradesh, is the nearest thing to 'Promised Land' for the poor and landless peasants of drought-ravaged Rayalaseema. Despite the fact that the very exodus of these peasants has brought down the wage rate for picking cotton from Rs 10 to Rs 5 and even Rs 3 per day, they trudge on nevertheless, for this 'Promised Land' promises them not Paradise, but just one meal every day, which is three times of what they can get in their own villages.

Rayalaseema—the Land of the Rayas (of Vijayanagar)—has always been a land of predators. The word 'raya'—like 'raja', 'rana', etc—indicates feudatory status, but the Rayas of Vijayanagar were nobody's feudatories

[1] According to Hindu mythology, the chaste Rshyasrnga brings rain to the kingdom of Anga with his magical powers.

when they could help it. At the height of their prowess, they ruled over a substantial part of the Deccan, and of the Tamil plains. To Nilakanta Sastri,[2] the arch-brahminical historian of South India, theirs was the warrior Hindu state par excellence. It was after their decline that their feudatories, the *nayaka*s and the *paliagar*s took over, with the latter of the two being the closest Indian approximation to Chinese warlords. These armed gangs of predators, sometimes (but not necessarily) camouflaged as revenue collectors, ravaged Rayalaseema until they met more than their match in the British. However, and in spite of the 'law and order' pretensions of the unctuous British bourgeoisie, the land continues to be ruled by those flaunting illicit arms, countrymade bombs and soda-water bottles (the poor man's Molotov cocktail). Armed gangs of landlords (delicately called 'village factions') have no-holds-barred fights over every issue. Thus everything—from excise or civil supplies contracts to election results—are decided through violent means in Rayalaseema. One Telugu Desam Party (TDP) legislator from Rayalaseema, who tried to export this culture to Hyderabad—thinking in all innocence and quite rightly so that what is good for Kurnool, Cuddapah and Anantapur should be good enough for Hyderabad—took along with him a jeep-load of explosives to help his party win the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation elections this February. However, his enterprise created a lot of sensation and considerable embarrassment to his leader N.T. Rama Rao, resulting (oddly enough) not in his expulsion from the party but in the transfer of the police commissioner of Hyderabad, who mistakenly thought that he was only doing his duty in arresting the legislator along with his jeep-load of explosives. But NTR thought otherwise; he instead declared in public that if only the police had been more cooperative, he and his electoral ally, the CPI(M), would have won the corporation elections, and as punishment transferred the police commissioner.

This is an aside, however.

The point being made here is that this culture of armed gang fights and drought go together. The reddys constitute the dominant landed community of Rayalaseema, as of Telangana; and unlike the kammas of coastal AP, who are a relatively homogeneous community in their historical origin, the reddys are an extremely heterogeneous lot. A proper historical study of the formation and evolution of this community would, in fact, comprehensively reflect the entire agrarian history of AP from the feudal

[2] K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, known for his *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*, and *Further Sources of Vijayanagar History*, among other works.

period onwards. At one end, the community received its dominant component from the first feudal overlords, who subjugated the community of original village settlers and went on to establish powerful dynasties; a component of lesser status was the class of village headmen, the *gramani* of classical Sanskrit, though not in the classical form but as they cut themselves free from the village community with the aid of the feudal hierarchy. Until very recently, the village headman was called a 'reddy' in Rayalaseema even if he were a brahmin by caste. At the other extreme, the caste expanded steadily by continuously absorbing upstart *kapu* cultivators (the equivalent of the Maratha kunbis), for whom, calling themselves reddys signified a rise in social status. This absorption of the kapus into the reddy caste is such a recent phenomenon that in Telangana, for instance, the peasants among the reddys usually describe themselves as kapus (with the term being both a caste name as well as a generic term for cultivators).

The point to be emphasised, anyway, is that the reddy landed gentry of Rayalaseema contains, among its varied elements, a component that is as capable of agrarian enterprise as the kammas of coastal AP, who are celebrated in this regard. But if they have, without exception, chosen other and less delicate methods of appropriating their share of the social surplus, and if they are able to find unemployed gangs of youth to act as their henchmen, that is primarily because of what may be loosely called their 'ungenerous nature'. The word 'loosely' is used here because how much of this ungenerosity is 'natural' and how much is a consequence of predatory misrule is an arguable question. The undeniable natural disadvantage is that much of Rayalaseema—especially Anantapur district—is situated in a rain-shadow region of the Deccan plateau and gets much less than the average rainfall in the country. Anantapur district has a normal rainfall of 544 mm, which is said to be the second lowest in the entire country. But it is difficult to pinpoint the impact that exploitative rule has had on this natural disadvantage in the district. There is evidence from British administrative and revenue records that drought has been a consistent phenomenon in Rayalaseema from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. About thirty drought years are identifiable from the reports between 1756 and 1947. The British, however, made the mistake of maintaining detailed records, while their predecessors, our rajas and nawabs, maintained none. And, therefore, the history of pre-British India easily gets mixed up with myths, more so if the myths have indeed been perpetrated to sustain the pride of a nationality, as is the case with Telugu nationalism and the kingdom of Vijayanagar. Although Vijayanagar straddled an area that is difficult to classify in terms of twentieth-century subnationalism,

the kings in the region were Telugus, and, therefore, the magnificence of Vijayanagar has become an integral part of the modern Telugu identity. It is regarded as a period of peace and plenty, of munificent kings and contented people, and so on. This unlikely golden age is supposed to have lasted well into the nineteenth century, until the consequences of British rule destroyed it. The good old days are recalled by local scholars and leaders with nostalgia. However, since these scholars are mostly brahmins, who held *srotriyam* villages[3] until 1950, and the leaders without exception are reddys with substantial landholdings, whose ancestors must have been village headmen if not actually *paliagars*, it is difficult to know how much of the lost glory is their own ancestral glory, and how much of their lament is disinterested. The history of drought in Rayalaseema is thus inextricably entangled with Telugu nationalism, feudatory nostalgia and srotriyam scholarship.

Having said all this, it must be added that popular memory—as distinct from ruling class nostalgia—cannot be fully discounted. The people *do* remember that even thirty or forty years ago, things were much better than now; and the official statistics, according to which seventeen of the last thirty-three years have been years of drought for the district of Anantapur, tell the same story. Perhaps it is a reasonable inference that irrespective of how unreal past glory might be, there *has* been a further deterioration in recent decades.

This brings us to Anantapur of mid-1986. The devastation of this district is pathetic. Miles upon miles of dry red soil alternate with the equally dry black beds of the tanks and streams, including the river that was poetically named Pinakini, but is commonly known as Pennar.[4] Members of the older generation recall that due to the ferocity of its floods, the river was called the river of corpses (*peenugula Penna*). Today, however, it is a joke of a river, and not just because its upper reaches have been dammed. The dam is there—the Upper Pennar project at Perur in Anantapur district—but

[3] Srotriya refers to a brahmin who practises vedic rites, as distinguished from the 'vedavid brahmin', who studies them only theoretically or the 'loukika brahmin', who pursues worldly affairs. The word 'srotriya' is derived from the verbal root *sru* (to hear, listen); srotriya, therefore, means a brahmin who is wellversed in orally handed down *sruti* texts. In large parts of South India, a srotriyam refers to 'Choutrum [Srotriyam] . . . said to be a gift of land to a man and his heirs, upon which an annual rent is reserved by Government to be paid in specie by the Choutramdar or holder of it, which rent is fixed and invariable and is always said to be less than the supposed yearly value of the land' (Tamil Nadu State Archives, Report and Accounts of the Old Farm of Tiruvendipuram, 30 June 1775, printed 1880, p. 2).

[4] The river rises in the Nandi Hills of Chikballapur district in Karnataka and runs 560 km north and east through Andhra Pradesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

nobody has seen a single drop of water or even a damp patch in its reservoir for the last seven years. A mythical debate is being carried on in the local press that the farmers of Karnataka in the upper reaches of the river have been constructing check dams across the streams that flow into the Pennar, thereby robbing Anantapur of its water. This can perhaps be put down to the common habit of blaming one's neighbours for otherwise inexplicable misfortunes.

The same is more or less true of the two other medium-scale irrigation projects of the district—the Bhairavanitippa and Chennarayaswamygudi projects. In addition, the 1,245 irrigation tanks, the pride of Anantapur, have been dry for the last three years and the 56,000-odd irrigation wells fitted hopefully with electric or diesel pump-sets went dry by the middle of the kharif season of 1985. Borewells were dug at the bottom of the wells, up to depths of 70 to 150 feet but only one borewell out of ten was a success. These occasional successes account for the odd patch of green in Anantapur that takes visitors by surprise. But even here it is neither paddy nor groundnut (the principal wet and dry crops, respectively, of the district) that are being grown but mulberry crop, an adjunct to sericulture. Consequently, the farmers are impoverished, and deep in debt. They have borrowed from every conceivable source of finance, ranging from commercial banks to cooperative societies to private moneylenders. The last are lending money at interest rates ranging from 2 to 4 per cent per month. The farmers have pledged their land, gold, houses, and anything else that they might have. But their most pathetic loss is that of cattle. Of the nine lakh cattle in the district, close to five lakh are either dead or have been sold at ridiculously low prices to butchers—in either case, they have been irrevocably lost to production. Even if it rains this June, as the papers are predicting with great optimism, the farmers have neither seed nor bullocks to cultivate the land, nor any unpledged property to obtain fresh loans against.

The lot of the landless is worse, of course. Those who are young enough have migrated to Bellary, Tumkur, Vijayawada, Bangalore, and some say, even Bombay; the destination is decided by the nearest road or rail junction. If your village is close to Guntakal, you can get a train to Bombay, and so you migrate to Bombay. If it is in the western talukas, then it is Bellary, and if in the southern talukas, then it is Bangalore. It makes no difference, however, because wherever the migrants go, they earn just enough to feed themselves, and nothing extra for those who have stayed back home. As for those who have stayed back, they are starving, eating only one meal after skipping two.

Needless to say, the predators, all Congressmen, are active. Although these Congressmen have ruled and held ministerial berths for many years, the reddy–kamma divide has left them on the wrong side of the power equation after the TDP's rise to power. With the shamelessness that is the special quality of 'Congress culture', they are crying themselves hoarse over the injustice done to Rayalaseema. They have formed all-party action committees—*vimochana samitis*, *praja samitis* and what not. They have enforced rasta rokos and bandhs. But the people trust them no more than they trust the government. The curse of the Congress(I) in Rayalaseema is that even if it were given a 'golden opportunity', the chance of a century, so to say, it would be unable to enthuse the people enough to gather behind it. But perhaps that is as the Congress(I) would have it, for any such enthusiasm on the part of the people would probably scare the Congressmen out of their wits.

Everybody is, therefore, waiting for the rains to come—each for his own reason—the farmer and the labourer, so that they may live; the government, so that it may be relieved from the tension of not doing anything; and the Congressmen, so that they may be preserved from the burden of running a crusade. But there is no Rshyasrnga around to bring rains.

Agrarian Struggles

EPW, 9 August 1986

The last two decades of theoretical research and political practice have fostered the realisation that there is nothing in the world as fascinating as the agrarian history and politics of India. The history defies summarisation and the politics defies an easy consummation. Just as many more tonnes of paper and ink would undoubtedly be expended before we can get a clear picture of India's agrarian history, much more struggle, sacrifice and suffering would have to be borne before its bloodstained pages reach their *finis*.

A.R. Desai's compilation,[1] a sequel to his earlier book, *Peasant Struggles in India*, is an attempt to record and briefly analyse the story of agrarian politics from 1947 to the present. Some of the articles in the book have been selected from journals; some are excerpted from books; some are reports, both official and unofficial; and some are written especially for this compilation. The articles are divided into two parts, one containing some theoretical pieces on 'Agrarian India after Independence', and some reports purportedly giving an 'all India' picture of agrarian struggles, with the other part consisting of articles depicting a 'regional' picture of agrarian struggles. The division is somewhat arbitrary as is the arrangement of the

[1] This is a review of A.R. Desai (ed.), *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence*, (Oxford University Press: Bombay), 1986, pp xxvi + 666, Rs 250.

pieces in part two of the book. Had they been arranged in the order of historical evolution of agrarian struggles—or at least in chronological order—the compilation would have made more sense. For instance, the report on the Srikakulam struggle[2] is ninth in the volume whereas the excerpt from Sumanta Banerjee[3] pertaining to the Naxalbari uprising is placed twenty-third. And the volume ends with an out-of-place account of the Kakdwip[4] peasant insurrection from the Tebhaga[5] days. The fact that no article contains the date of its original publication confounds this confused arrangement further. An opinion or even a statement of 'fact' makes no sense unless one knows when it was made; coming from a person of Desai's experience and seriousness of purpose, this carelessness must be considered unfortunate.

Theoretical issues

The editor's General Introduction, his remarks in the separate introductions written to the two parts, his article entitled 'Changing Profile of Rural Society in India', Sumanta Banerjee's (excerpted) chapter entitled 'The Rural Scene', and Gail Omvedt's 'Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts' are the entirely theoretical portions of the volume, which set out to conceptualise the social structure of rural India, though practically all the articles contain a certain amount of theorising on agrarian relations. The most remarkable thing about this selection is that it completely ignores the protracted debate on the 'mode of production in Indian agriculture', which excited many economists in the 1970s. While I suspect that this exclusion is because the editor's *a priori* theoretical position (which may be broadly described as Trotskyist) forecloses all debate on the question, the omission is nevertheless well deserved; an equal and related blessing is that Desai has resisted the temptation to treat his readers to some more exegesis of the third volume of Lenin's *Collected Works*. Instead, the editor's analysis of agrarian relations starts with an analysis of the Indian state. The nature and intentions of the state are central to his understanding of the agrarian scene; in his own words, 'I will go on to discuss the changes that have taken place in Indian rural society as a result of the multi-pronged measures adopted by the central and state governments of the Indian union to transform agrarian society politically, economically, socio-institutionally and culturally'! This perspective makes his analysis much superior to the 'mode of production' debate with its empirical concentration on landholding patterns, and statistics about tenancy, tractors and tubewells. The stark difference between the Tsarist state and the modern Indian state would make any imitation of the method employed by Lenin irrelevant for understanding agrarian relations in India.

Desai's understanding of the matter starts with the presumption that after 1947, the Indian state set out to consciously develop agriculture along capitalist lines. The abolition of revenue intermediaries and initiation of other land reform measures are said to have led to the consolidation of a broader class of rural rich, a class that the state is perceived to have deliberately created in order to hasten capitalist development in agriculture. There will be general agreement with his statement that '[land reforms] sliced off a bit of the old landowning classes, those that owned enormous estates, and incorporated a small upper section of the tenants in the landowning group, thus creating a broader strata of landowners....' This is a succinct statement of the genesis of the rural gentry of independent India; the difficulty is with the concluding clause that '[this class] would actively take interest in developing agriculture on capitalist lines'. There are two separate issues here: one is what the Indian state intended to achieve, and the other is what it actually achieved. It is by no means clear that the two are the same, nor that either of them is the 'creation of profit-maximising capitalist agriculturists'. The Indian Constitution is formally, and impeccably, bourgeois. So are most of the institutions of the state. For Desai, it follows straight from this that the Indian state deliberately set out to promote capitalism, within and without agriculture. An alternative perspective would be that the Indian state that came into being during the period 1947–50 inherited the responsibility of holding together a diverse bunch of propertied classes, and of attracting to itself the loyalty of a terribly restive mass of peasantry and workers. It further had to enrich the ruling classes and to create the institutions necessary for this enrichment. There is no logic by which this multiple burden necessarily results in the conscious promotion of capitalist enterprise. We are not living in the eighteenth century. Many of the institutions created by the Indian state are formally, but only formally, bourgeois. The Indian polity is socialist in its ideology, and bourgeois in its formal structure, but accumulates an assorted *mélange*

[2] The tribal–peasant uprising of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the then Srikakulam district of north Andhra Pradesh. The struggle did not pre-date but took place after the Naxalbari uprising in West Bengal.

[3] Columnist and leftist political commentator.

[4] A subdivision of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal.

[5] The Tebhaga movement was a militant campaign initiated in Bengal by the Kisan Sabha, the peasant front of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1946. According to the prevalent practice, tenants were required to give half of their harvest to the owners of the land. The demand of the Tebhaga (sharing by thirds) movement was to reduce the share given by the tenants to the landlords to one-third.

of social relations in its real content. The quickest and easiest way of executing its task was to subordinate itself in a comprador relation to imperialism, encourage not so much entrepreneurial capital as a parasitical capital sponging upon the state (*bureaucrat* capital) and upon imperialism, create an industrial and infrastructural base for the capital to sponge upon, and safeguard the property and dominance of the newly consolidating class or rural rich, while simultaneously modernising the technological means of their exploitation. The resulting configuration of class relations is not exactly the evolution of profit-maximising capitalist farmers at one pole and an agrarian proletariat at the other.

How Much Differentiation?

Seen in the manner elucidated above, the class analysis of rural India provided by Desai leaves many questions unanswered. The premier point of doubt is as to how much of the differentiation that he (and not only he) discovers among the rural rich is real and how much is a product of *a priori* theoretical reasoning. In one breathtaking sentence, Desai manages to speak of rich farmers, *kulak*s, feudal lords and the rural bourgeoisie; in other sentences, he speaks of feudal landlords, capitalist landlords, semi-feudal landlords and kulaks. With due respect to Desai, one is tempted to challenge him to walk into any village of his choice and exhibit for our edification individual specimens of these well-defined classes. Does such a differentiation really exist within the microcosm of a village? The *ensemble* of social relations that define the rural rich have not been differentiated into distinct classes; all that exists is a variation in the composition from region to region, with this variation being determined by the local soil conditions, irrigation, history and politics. The reason why no across-the-board differentiation has taken place is precisely the comprador and bureaucrat nature of Indian capital. If Indian capital had had to depend upon its internal strength and dynamism for its self-expansion, it would have been forced to contend with and destroy, or at least totally subsume, the precapitalist relations. But since it is not so constrained, and since its expansion is provided for by the state and by imperialism, it has never found it necessary to rid itself of precapitalist qualities. There has not been a single instance of 'profit-maximising capitalist farmers' fighting feudal landholders in the history of post-Independence India. There have only been agitations of *all* the rural rich for a greater share of the resources that the state has borrowed from abroad or generated for itself.

All said and done, class is as class does. The poor can be a class-in-themselves without being a class-for-themselves but the rich are so class-conscious that if they are not self-consciously a class, they cannot materially be a class. If the so-called kulaks and capitalist landlords have never fought the (equally so-called) feudal landlords, then either one of the two classes does not exist (it is the virtue of Gail Omvedt's position that she takes this stand) or the differentiation that is read into the rural rich is entirely imaginary. The latter stand has been taken by the CPI(ML) movement, which presumes the entire rural rich to be one rather heterogeneous class that has not undergone the differentiation inherent in its heterogeneity precisely because Indian capital is comprador and bureaucrat. This is one important implication of saying that agrarian relations are semi-feudal. It is a caricature of the CPI(ML) position to say that they identify a category of people called 'semi-feudal landlords' and fight that class to the exclusion of other sections of the rural rich. It is necessary to clarify this point since it has become customary for superior intellectuals to sermonise on the supposed theoretical idiocy of the CPI(ML) groups while patronisingly patting them on the back for their sacrifice, militancy, etc. (In Desai's introduction to part two, he even manages to hold up the Bhojpur struggle, led by the CPI(ML), as an example that disproves the CPI(ML)'s own alleged strategy of fighting only 'feudal landlords' or overcoming only 'semi-feudal obstacles'!)

It is perhaps necessary to go a little deeper into the matter. Desai is right in placing the state centre stage in the drama of agrarian change; he is also right in identifying the centrality of the role assumed by the state in socio-economic transformation. The objection, however, is to his acceptance of formal appearance as real content, which is no better than the CPI's celebrated acceptance of ideology as reality. The real content of the state's role in agrarian change lies not in the promotion of capitalist agriculture but in the overall bureaucratisation of capital, especially agrarian capital. This was paralleled by the spread of the very singular phenomenon of parliamentary and panchayat politics of India. The meshing of the two in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) and their role in development strategies, in cooperative institutions, and in the sharing of political spoils, within the overall context of state-sponsored and imperialist-supported technological modernisation of the forces of production, has created a situation wherein the newly consolidated class of rural rich lives in painless harmony amidst a welter of what would otherwise be serious contradictions. This is the rural gentry, the class of landlords against whom the agrarian struggle is directed.

Just as it is impossible to differentiate the rural rich into 'feudal' and 'capitalist' landlords, it is equally impossible to differentiate the rural poor into the capitalistically exploited agricultural proletariat and the feudally

exploited landless peasantry. A labourer who works for daily wages this year may need money for some purpose next year and get bonded on that account and remain bonded until he repays the loan to the satisfaction of the landlord, by putting in an amount of labour that is in no sense the value-equivalent of the loan amount plus any predetermined interest. Then he becomes an 'agricultural proletarian' until he gets bonded once again. Now either one could declare that this is all capitalism since the product is sold in the market either way, or one could preserve one's theoretical sanity by realising that one is searching for a nonexistent differentiation.

It is also necessary to deal with the 'rich peasant question', on which again patronising sermons are frequently read out, especially to the CPI(ML) groups. Part of the confusion stems from the way in which the term 'peasant' is used; it is frequently used as undiscriminatingly as the Mughal and British revenue administrators used the terms *raiyat* or *ryot*. If the term is restricted to landholders who actually take part in cultivation, or set hand to plough, so to say, then there is no question of the rich peasantry *as a class* being the principal target of agrarian struggle. Any such understanding would be suicidal. But even so, the question of unity among labourers, poor peasants, middle peasants and at least one section of the rich peasants remains problematic. It is not the principle of unity that is objectionable but the vantage point from which one desires it. One can seek the unity from the standpoint of either the rich peasantry or the poor. This is the essence of the difference between the CPI and CPI(M), on the one hand, and the CPI(ML) groups, on the other. When the CPI(M) accuses the naxalites of setting 'labourers against peasants', or even (as happened in the Khammam district of Andhra recently) goes to the shameful extent of conducting meetings denouncing some foreign-funded voluntary agencies which are filing cases against the middle and rich peasants under the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act for maintaining annual farm-labourers in some degree of bondage, the nature of the 'peasant unity' that the party seeks is clear. The dilemma of that party in this respect is well brought out by N. Krishnaji's discussion of the CPI(M)'s strategies (Chapter 16).

Putting it this way simplifies the issue, but to seek unity from the standpoint of the poor, especially when the 'caste question' intervenes, can be painfully difficult. The unity is to be sought, not by sacrificing and weakening the interests of the landless but precisely by strengthening their position and class unity to such an extent that the middle and rich peasantry see no future for themselves except in a class alliance with them, regardless of howsoever unwilling that may be. The difficulty in realising such a strength is one of the principal problems facing the CPI(ML) groups today,

and the intractability of the problem is one of the reasons for the brutal repression they are facing. But it is a real problem that needs to be faced frontally and cannot be wished away by pretending that the naxalite groups are so stupid that they do not themselves know what they are doing, a presumption that both Desai and Gail Omvedt are guilty of.

Historical Dimension

If Desai's theoretical standpoint throws light on the agrarian question by putting the state at the centre of analysis, Gail Omvedt supplies another important dimension that is missing from usual discussions on the 'mode of production' question, namely, the historical dimension. Lenin's analysis of the development of capitalism in Russia starts with pre-capitalist Russia as its point of departure; our economists' analysis starts with Lenin as the point of departure. And when history is thus thrown out, caste also goes out with it. I suspect that it is the universal reluctance among our intellectuals to look caste in the face that impels them to ignore history. A peculiar caste-blindness affects Indian intellectuals, especially the marxists, who will even pretend that they have no caste if you allow them to. When an Indian marxist (like any other Indian) meets a new acquaintance, the first thing he does is to guess his caste from his name, his surname, his bearing, his mannerisms, and his language; but in public, he primly pretends that caste does not exist. This unreal attitude has resulted in a most ahistorical social science, which is a pity since India has nothing if not a history. There is no other country in the world that has as much history as India—not merely in the sense that many things have happened here in the past, but in the sense of *living* history, the unbroken continuity of the precipitation of the past. The only Indian marxist to realise this was the great D.D. Kosambi,[6] and it is no accident that caste occupies a central position in his analysis of Indian history, nor that his analysis has a distinctly Indian texture. Even when one disagrees with Kosambi, one knows that it is India and Indian society that he is talking about, whereas with most of our marxist social scientists, even when one is in full agreement with them, one cannot be very sure as to which country they are talking about—they could as well be talking about Afghanistan as of India. Unfortunately, Kosambi's legacy has been given a silent burial by his own professed admirers.

It has, therefore, and quite paradoxically too, been left to foreigners (the prevalent climate forces me to hasten to add that I do not use the word pejoratively) like Daniel Thorner and Gail Omvedt to supply a historical

[6] Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi (1907–66) was a mathematician and a marxist historian.

and specifically *Indian* perspective to the analysis of agrarian relations. It is not merely a question of throwing in caste as one more 'variable', but the historical study of the evolution of agrarian relations, and the location of agrarian struggles within this evolution. Gail Omvedt's article, 'Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts' is a good example of what such a study could be like.

However, Omvedt's contention, with all its enchanting simplicity, that upper caste feudal landholders (*maliks*) have been replaced by middle caste capitalist farmers (*kisans*), and that the anti-feudal conflict of the middle caste tenants against the upper caste landlords has been replaced by the anti-capitalist struggle of the dalit poor (mazdoors) against the kisans merely underlines the inadequacy of our understanding of agrarian history, and of caste as a part of it. Notwithstanding the uncommon unanimity among social scientists in the use of the expression 'middle caste', I have never been able to understand what it means: middle of *what?* If it is the *chaturvarnya* of the brahmins, then (apart from the arithmetic difficulty that the number four has no middle), it is firstly irrelevant to agrarian analysis, and secondly makes more nonsense of existing nonsense. The Yajurvedic chaturvarnya died a natural death 2,000 years ago with the birth of the 'self-sufficient' village economy, and feudal society with this village at the base. The elaborate caste (what North Indians call jati) system that developed subsequently had little relation to the chaturvarnya; properly speaking, there have been no kshatriyas during the feudal period (but only pretenders); the vaisyas ceased to be cultivators and became traders; and the term 'sudra' ceased to refer to a real class as in the past but became a juridical-ideological expression and a term of brahminical abuse. The brahmin, the lynchpin of the system, was the only element of continuity from the pre-feudal chaturvarnya to feudal caste; it was only his celebrated incapacity to let go of anything, howsoever dead it may be, which kept the chaturvarnya alive, and it required all the sophistry of Manu with his theory of *varna-sankara*[7] to keep the pretence of continuity. Now our rural sociologists want to dissect this mummy to discover something called a 'middle caste'!

It is not just a matter of terminology, however. What do (I quote from Gail Omvedt) 'jats, kurmis, yadavs, ahirs, marathas, reddys, kammas, etc', (without prejudice to whoever else is included in that 'etcetera') have in common? Or (I now quote from Desai) 'marathas, patidars, jats, ahirs, kunbis, bhumihars, reddys, nairs, vokkaligas' for that matter? There have been not only cultivators but also kings, feudatories, barons, overlords and revenue intermediaries among the reddys, nairs, marathas and jats; the bhumihars, far from being a 'middle caste', have brahmin pretensions; the ahirs and the yadavs are yet to fully consummate their transition from a pastoral community to a cultivating caste; the kammas are predominantly cultivators but for the last hundred years, their ranks have always included a segment of overlords. These castes have nothing real in common, but a theory which says that they are all 'middle caste' cultivators, who were, once upon a time, tenants of 'twice-born' upper caste (brahmin, kshatriya) landlords; that they took the lead in anti-feudal struggles; and that they have now become capitalist, profit-maximising kisans, prone to exploiting low caste and dalit labour. This neat theory appears to be an uncritical extrapolation from the reality of certain parts of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (while admitting this much, I am accepting at face value the assertions of Gail Omvedt, and of Rajendra Singh, as they wrote on the land-grab movement of parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh). In truth, the correspondence between ritual varna hierarchy and caste, and between caste and class, has never been so simple, nor are all the castes internally so homogeneous or so homogeneous with respect to the political economy that class relations can be discussed exclusively in terms of caste relations. Indeed, in many parts of the country, it would be very difficult to identify the medieval rural communities with either the varna hierarchy or with today's castes. It is a mistake to believe that today's castes have always been there; many of them have evolved as castes or caste complexes through the transformation and crystallisation of diverse communities. Here, the misleading permanence of the spurious chaturvarnya is attributed to the continuously emerging and evolving phenomenon of caste.

To speak of Andhra Pradesh, where there are no kshatriyas (except the self-anointed rajus of the north-coastal districts), and the vaisyas have never held much land, the class of feudal landholders did not consist exclusively or even principally of 'twice-born' castes, but included along with the brahmins many nonbrahmin communities, which are not always easy to identify with today's castes but whose descendants today count themselves among the reddys, kammas and velamas. Certainly, in the British and Asafjahi territories[8] of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the landlords of these communities, along with the brahmins, constituted the

[7] The mixing of, or marriage across, varnas or caste categories, resulting in progeny of mixed parentage which is said to lead to 'chaos'.

[8] The Asafjahi dynasty was founded in 1720 by Mir Qamar-ud-Din Siddiqi, a viceroy of the Deccan under the Mughal emperors from 1713 to 1721. It ended on 17 September 1948.

bulk of the feudal gentry. The anti-feudal peasant revolts were aimed as much against these landlords as against the brahmin *srotriyam*[9] and *agraharam*[10] holders. And often, people of the same caste were ranged on either side of the struggle—kamma cultivators against kamma zamindars in parts of coastal AP, and reddy cultivators against reddy deshmukhs in Telangana. This duality continues to this day so that the reddys, for instance, count among their numbers both haughty feudal types, who would not deign to touch a plough, as well as hard-working small cultivators. Which of these are the middle caste capitalist kisans that we are being asked to discover in rural India?

Let us leave our collective ignorance at that.

Agrarian Struggles

There are about twenty articles and reports in the volume dealing with agrarian struggles in various parts of the country. The selection can be described as eclectic or catholic according to one's prejudices. Since this is no time for being sectarian, let us agree to call it catholic. There is an impartial selection from struggles led by the CPI, CPI(M), CPI(ML), the socialists, and various organisations like the Shetkari Sangathana, etc. At least one article, namely, Jan Breman's piece entitled 'Mobilisation of Landless Labourers: Halpatis of South Gujarat', takes its place in the volume as the dialectical opposite of the volume's theme; it is not a report on an agrarian struggle but on how agrarian struggles are stifled by organisations floated by the ruling classes, for it deals with the immobilisation of landless labourers by gandhian politics. If the inclusion of this article testifies to the editor's dialectical understanding of history, then the inclusion of a report on Naga and Mizo struggles, which have nothing agrarian about them in an empiricist sense, indicates that he understands his theme politically and not merely sociologically. As regards India's agrarian revolution, irrespective of however it is understood or conceptualised, it cannot be complete without meeting the nationality aspirations of the people of the Northeast. And it would be a piece of gratuitous presumption to compliment Desai on his attempt to distance himself from the mechanical understanding of the two major communist parties, which view all nationality struggles primarily in terms of India's unity, integrity, and 'foreign conspiracies'.

[9] Lands assigned to brahmins by kings and zamindars for the maintenance of temples. See p. 162.

[10] Assignment of villages to brahmins for the collection of revenue for maintaining temples and performing rituals in the villages.

However, it is precisely because of the editor's evidently dialectical and political understanding of the theme that one feels a little let down by the end product. Not all the contributors he has chosen are motivated by a kindred spirit; a few of them are even quite snootily distrustful of politics though they are excited by mass struggles. Swasti Mitter, for instance, while writing about the CPI(M)-led peasant struggle of Sonarpur (Chapter 24), reveals that she undertook her field trip in search of ordinary peasants who had joined the movement not because of 'political indoctrination' but out of a desire to 'seek redress against social injustice' and to obtain 'some immediate gain'. This separation of politics (seen pejoratively as something that is indoctrinated, injected into the people from above and outside) by the individual authors from their desire for social justice and material gain, which is sometimes elevated to the status of a theory of historiography, offends the spirit of the editor's introductions. It is doubtless very exciting to uncover what the masses themselves think of their struggles, but if one is more interested in changing the world than in interpreting it, one cannot but accord central importance to politics, and one cannot but view politics as a concentrated expression of the economic and social desires of the people, rather than as something injected externally into them. The question would still remain whether a given politics really expresses the desires, but then that is a matter for concrete analysis, not prejudiced pronouncements.

A similar contribution is the somewhat misleadingly titled article, 'Agrarian Dimensions of Tribal Movements' by K.S. Singh, a former director of the Anthropological Survey of India. His argument actually is that whereas in left-led movements the peasants fought for agrarian issues, the tribal struggles had a more than agrarian dimension; that there was no real tribal participation in left-led tribal movements; and as usual, that the naxalites who led tribal movements did not know what they were talking about. (The universality of the belief that the CPI(ML) groups are stupid is quite remarkable. It stretches all the way from bureaucrat-intellectuals to activist-intellectuals and intellectual-bureaucrats. It no doubt has something to do with the fact that the Marxist-Leninist groups have largely confined themselves to the poorest of the poor, whose inarticulateness is axiomatic to urban intellectuals.) Singh's conclusions contrast rather sharply with the detailed accounts of Tarun Kumar Banerjee on the Srikakulam movement (Chapter 9) and of Sumanta Banerjee on the Naxalbari uprising (Chapter 23).

The contention here is not that such a viewpoint is worthless and, therefore, should not have been included in the collection. Individual viewpoints apart, these articles are quite interesting and informative in

terms of the details they offer. Even when they do not inform the readers about the purported subject, they do inform us about the writer, which is equally valuable. Every writer is, in his own way, a socially defined genius; and the taxonomy of intellectuals is as necessary for social and historical studies as that of animals is for zoology. But if Desai believes—and I have no doubt that he does—that it is more important to change the world than to interpret it, and anyway that one can properly interpret the world only in the course of changing it, then I believe that he should have, and could have, chosen a more apposite selection of articles, perhaps with more analytical introductions to the two parts. Such a selection would have revealed not merely some kind of a cross-sectional picture of agrarian struggles but also a dynamic and, let us say, a historical picture, for which one has to now painstakingly search through the volume. What is the picture that emerges?

The period covered by the volume can be divided provisionally into two parts. One possible classification is the pre-Naxalbari and post-Naxalbari periods; or, less provocatively, the period prior to the drought years of the mid-1960s and the subsequent period. The National Labour Institute's (NLI) report (Chapter 10) on post-independence peasant movements in Andhra Pradesh divides the period into the pre–and post–Green Revolution parts. This understanding would perhaps find approval with most of our social scientists. But, as argued below, the severe drought of the mid-1960s and the reverberations of the unfinished business of the 1964 split in the CPI (and perhaps even the Chinese Cultural Revolution) had much more to do with the change in the nature of agrarian struggles in India than did the 'Green Revolution'.

The first period is characterised by the low level of agrarian struggles, lack of political direction in these struggles, and the landed-peasant rather than the landless-labourer character of the struggles, among other things. It is quite striking that there is only *one* article in the entire collection that has anything sizeable to say about 'agrarian struggles' during the first period: this is the NLI report on AP mentioned above; and its compilation of 'agrarian struggles' is rather laboured. Three others who make such an attempt, namely, N. Krishnaji for Kerala (Chapter 16), B.D. Talib for Punjab (Chapter 20), and Gopal Iyer and Vidyasagar for Tamil Nadu (Chapter 21), discover that they have nothing much to report on the first period, and fill up the space with a discussion of land reform acts and the topography of the land.

All the agrarian struggles thus properly belong to the second period; and this would in no way have been altered if Desai had not decided (quite properly) to exclude the agitations of the better-off landholders for remunerative prices and subsidised inputs. Sharad Joshi *also* belongs to the second period, and not the first.

The Upsurge and its Roots

What is the reason for this sharp change? It has been customary to regard the Green Revolution as both the cause of the change as well as the demarcating line. This opinion is uncritically accepted since it fits in with the thesis of the growth of capitalist agriculture promoted especially by the Green Revolution technology, and resulting in heightened tensions in villages. I suspect that it also fits in with a vulgar understanding of historical materialism wherein tractors and tubewells belong to the 'objective conditions' but conscious human practice does not. In any case, the understanding does not fit in with the facts: Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Dhanbad, Dhulia and Warli, the areas of tribal–peasant struggles reported in the volume were not—and to this day are not—Green Revolution areas. The same is true of Purnea and Madhubani in Bihar, wherein the *bataidari* struggles that took place there are graphically described with a wealth of historical detail by Nirmal Sengupta and his colleagues (Chapters 12 and 13). Bhojpur had its Intensive Agricultural District Programme development but that dates back to the year 1960 and is not a specifically Green Revolution phenomenon (Manju Kala, R.N. Maharaj and Kalyan Mukherjee, Chapter II). Neither the land-grab by the socialist parties (report from *Mankind,* Chapter 4) nor that by the CPI (Chapter 6, by Giriprasad—Guruprasad is surely a misprint?) took place in Green Revolution areas. Other than Punjab, the only Green Revolution area reported in this volume is Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu (Chapter 21 by Gopal Iyer and Vidyasagar) but the agrarian struggle of Thanjavur has had a long history pre-dating the Green Revolution.

The real reasons for the agrarian upsurge after the mid-1960s are much more complex, but they can be gleaned from a careful reading of the reports included in this volume. In Naxalbari, Srikakulam and Bhojpur, it was plainly a political decision, inspired by the disenchantment with what was perceived as the CPI(M)'s unwillingness to thoroughly consummate the 1964 split, as well as the heroic call of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Sumanta Banerjee, Chapter 23). In the case of the bataidars of Purnea and Madhubani, as described by Nirmal Sengupta and others, it was the realisation of the fraud perpetrated in the name of land reforms, coupled with the famine-like conditions of the mid-1960s. In tribal Bihar, it was the culmination of a long history of land alienation and usurious exploitation

brought to a pitch by drought, and shaped into an organised political form by leaders like A.K. Roy, in whose case again, it was a political decision born of disillusionment with the CPI and CPI(M) due to their failure to organise the rural poor militantly. These three elements—conscious political decision, severe drought, and the popular realisation of the worthless character of agrarian reform legislation—lie behind all the agrarian struggles that broke out from 1967 onwards. It is a different matter if it is argued that the immiserisation of the rural poor and the strengthening of the rural rich, which came about as a consequence of the entire strategy of agrarian development, formed the backdrop against which drought and the radicalisation of left politics worked themselves out.

The upsurge had many consequences, some inspiring and some amusing. One was the pseudo-radicalisation of the old left—especially the CPI and the Socialists, who hurriedly organised land-grab movements in many parts of the country. This unaccustomed activity, like an epileptic fit, left them exhausted at the end of one season. They had no inkling what to do after some land was grabbed. CPI's Giriprasad ends his report, enthusiastically titled 'The Great Land Struggle', with the statement that 'the most significant achievement of the land struggle was the appointment of the Central Land Reform Committee by the Central Government'. This proud proclamation is not so much a conclusion as an epitaph.

A fresh bout of land reforms was itself among the consequences of the upsurge. Ceilings were sharply lowered (at any rate on paper) in many states, and most of the surplus land that has been taken possession of, was acquired during this period. Another consequence of the upsurge was the shift of political focus to the landless and poor peasants, who had contributed most of the militant might to the upsurge. Desai, who was ostensibly waiting all this while for someone to recognise and organise the 'agricultural proletariat', is so touched when the CPI forms the Bharatiya Khet Mazdur Union (BKMU) that he readily compliments that party on being the first to recognise the separate existence of and to organise the landless labourers. He certainly knows better. The formation of the BKMU was a genuflection to those heady times. That organisation has never led any systematic struggles for land redistribution or for implementation of minimum wages legislation, unless one counts its agitational activity during election time. In villages where both the labourers' union and the same party's farmers' unions exist, the former is subordinate to the latter. It is only where the farmers are aligned with the Congress (and again only when the CPI is not pro-Congress) that the labourers' union of the CPI exhibits some militancy. And where the farmers are pro-CPI and the labourers are organised by the CPI(ML) groups, the environment is one of hostile confrontation. The same is true of the CPI(M), which has exhibited such hostility even towards foreign-funded voluntary organisations that are organising landless labourers. (I hold no brief for these foreign-funded organisations, and I believe that irrespective of the intentions of the people working for them, they would ultimately do more harm than good to the people of our country, but it must be recognised that this confrontation is one of the reasons why the CPI(M) is mounting a campaign against foreign-funded and denominational voluntary organisations.)

However, apart from these tangential by-products thrown up centrifugally by the upsurge, what happens to the upsurge itself? Militancy is only militancy, and not politics by itself. And the fact that one is inspired by the emergence of the struggles of the wretched of this land, the agricultural labourers and tribals, surely indicates that one's heart is in the right place. But meaningful politics requires something more than a heart in the right place!

It is, I think, a major failing of Desai's commendable effort that it provides no answer to this question. The reason is that the compilation really ends with the Emergency years, though some of the articles and reports have a long tail stretching into the 1980s. The story of agrarian struggle in post-Independence India really divides itself into three periods, not two. The first is up to the mid-1960s, when there were no struggles worth the name; the second is the period from the mid-1960s onwards to the lifting of the Emergency, during which time there were widespread struggles but which were either spontaneous or were hesitantly finding their feet; and the third is the post-Emergency period, during which the organised struggles exhibited a greater extent, sophistication and understanding, faced a rapidly altering situation, and were rewarded with a mixed bag of consequences in the confrontation. The states of Bihar and AP have been the major theatres showcasing both the discovery of solutions to old problems and the existence of a bunch of new problems. It is sad that the Bihar and AP of the post-Emergency period find no place in the volume. Since the editor cannot be accused of either hostility or ignorance, one is nonplussed at this omission. It is true that not much material is available in English to facilitate a comprehensive account of these struggles but enough is available to provide at least a glimpse. The pages of this journal [*Economic and Political Weekly*] themselves have carried many reports; and the booklet issued by 'People for a New India' from which Desai has borrowed the piece on Naga and Mizo struggles, also contains material on Karimnagar during the post-Emergency period, the theatre of one of the most widespread agrarian

struggles in recent times. And Desai, who has for long taken active interest in the civil liberties movement, has in his possession many reports of civil rights teams on AP and Bihar. Perhaps then, the omission is because even as Desai believes that the CPI(ML) groups have 'elevated the movements of the rural poor from being bogged down in pure economism and reformism to a new heightened political level', his theoretical and political prejudices blind him to the crucial strategic and tactical lessons learnt by them, which have taken the 'heightened political level' one step higher. The contention is not that the naxalite groups alone are in search of the path that would put an end to the long history of blood and pain which defines agrarian India; many others—from doubting marxists to dissident Jesuits—are also seeking the elusive path, but there can be no comparison between the two in terms of political significance. This is where Desai's catholicity begins paying diminishing returns.

It is impossible to end this review without paying a heartfelt compliment to the editor's undying spirit, which appears to be immune to all the demoralising pressures of our age of despondency in politics and pedantry in thought. The best tribute one can pay to him is to hope that he will be around long enough to edit one more volume, this one on agrarian struggles during the post-Emergency period.

Anti-Reservation, Yet Once More

EPW, 6 September 1986

It seems that the sounds of the future are echoing backwards to resound in the present. As one reads the posters and listens to the arguments, one is filled with a sense of unease, a premonition of the scenes that would be witnessed on the streets of this land twenty, thirty or forty years hence; a prescience that is paradoxically akin to a feeling of *deja vu* in reversed time.

On the face of it, there is nothing alarming about the picture; it is perhaps even slightly amusing. There are these hundreds of youths, both boys and girls, well-fed and well-dressed, marching along the streets, with posters in their hands and slogans on their lips. They are obviously more accustomed to picnicking than to agitating, for their agitation is more like a picnic. Their slogans too do not belong to the world of Indian mass politics. They are, needless to say, mostly in English; and they have none of the sonorous resonance that we are all accustomed to; instead they have the crisp brevity of stickers and advertisements.

The aplomb with which the agitation is being conducted is astonishing in itself. Not a single agitation since N.T. Rama Rao came to power has been tolerated so benignly; and never have the Andhra Pradesh police smiled so much at agitators. Their hands must surely be itching to have a go at the agitators, for it must be said to their credit that they have always exhibited commendable impartiality in thrashing troublemakers of any sort. But NTR has warned them in a well-publicised statement that 'however much the

anti-reservationists provoke the police, the police must not get provoked'. Democratic rights are, for the time being, having a good innings in AP. The agitators deflate the tyres of buses and police jeeps; they take out endless processions in Hyderabad, where prohibitory orders have been continuously in force for the last seventeen years. One day, they travel ticketless *en masse* in buses all over the state, while the next day they have a bandh, the third day, a rasta roko, and so on. They are trying out all the agitational forms we have heard about and some more besides. If anyone wants to know what the future 'stateless' society imagined by the communists would look like and how freely the people would be able to exercise their democratic rights in such a society, they can walk into Hyderabad these days and watch it in action.

However, since we are not living in a stateless society, this situation arouses some suspicion; and the suspicion gets strengthened when one observes that during the same period, a procession of fishermen protesting against the government's policy of contracting out fishing rights in irrigation tanks to wealthy contractors was mercilessly lathi-charged. Not to mention what is happening in rural Telangana in the name of suppressing the naxalite movement.

Muralidhar Rao Commission

It all started with NTR's decision to pull out of the secretariat's cupboards the report of the Muralidhar Rao Commission on reservation to Backward Castes (BCs). The commission had been appointed in January 1982 and had submitted its report in August that year. Nobody appears to have bothered much about the report all these years until NTR pulled it out recently with an eye on the ensuing elections to the panchayat mandals; and Muralidhar Rao himself had passed away in the meanwhile with some question marks attached to his integrity.

The report, apart from being rather shoddy, is a very peculiar document. From the terms of its reference, it appears that the intention of the Congress government in constituting the commission was either to comply with the letter of the recommendations of the Anantharaman Commission of 1970, which had recommended that the classification and quantum of reservation to the BCs should be reviewed after ten years; or, worse, to actually identify at least a few BCs which had 'progressed' by using reservation during the last decade, and to delete them from the list of beneficiaries. What Muralidhar Rao (who himself belonged to a BC) did was to ignore the terms of reference and set out to do all he could to help the BCs, a decision that is difficult to find fault with, all things considered. He, therefore, refused to delete any of the BCs from the existing list (with the exception of one section of the kalingas of Srikakulam), but added nine more to the list instead. Since it would be a miracle if any BC had succeeded in pulling itself up to level of the reddys, brahmins and kammas in a matter of ten years, it is difficult to find fault with this reluctance of Muralidhar Rao to delete some of the BCs from the list either.

What really incensed the Forward Castes,[1] however, was that he recommended that the quantum of reservation for the BCs should have been increased from 25 to 44 per cent. Muralidhar Rao supported this by a simple piece of arithmetic. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and minorities together constitute about 30 per cent of the population of Andhra Pradesh. The remaining 70 per cent is shared between the BCs and the Forward Castes. Since no caste-based census has been taken after 1931, Muralidhar Rao chose to go by the estimate of the Mandal Commission,[2] according to which the Forward Castes represent 17.58 per cent of the population. Muralidhar Rao, who apparently did not care for decimals, rounded this off to 18 per cent, and deduced that the BCs therefore constitute 52 per cent of the state's population. He further estimated that about 8 per cent of the BCs manage to compete on their own steam with the Forward Castes. How he arrived at this estimate is rather obscure, for he obviously did not undertake any kind of statistical exercise, and indeed, the hallmark of his effort is total unconcern for any systematic procedure in arriving at numerical estimates. However, the fact that he thought of estimating this figure at all is indicative of the scruples he must have suffered from! He then deducted this 8 per cent from 52 and arrived at the recommendation of 44 per cent reservation for the BCs. He must have been at peace with himself when he breathed his last.

It is this arithmetic that infuriated the Forward Castes. Their argument is that Muralidhar Rao, on the one hand, accepts the Mandal Commission's estimate of the proportion of Forward Castes in the population, but on the

[1] We have retained Balagopal's usage of 'Forward' and 'upper' caste in this volume, for it reflects the prevalence of the term among analysts of the time and also its usage by the Muralidhar Rao Commission.

[2] The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 by the Janata Party government at the Centre with a mandate to 'identify the socially and educationally backward'. Headed by parliamentarian Bindheshwari Prasad Mandal, its brief was to consider the question of quotas for the 'Backward' and 'Other Backward' classes, similar to those that were provided for the SCs and STs, to redress the issue of caste discrimination. It used eleven social, economic and educational indicators to determine backwardness. The commission released its report in 1980. The V.P. Singh-led National Front government sought to implement the recommendations of Mandal's report in 1989.

other hand, he wants to have nothing to do with that commission's criterion for backwardness; instead he jealously keeps out of the list of BCs some of the presently Forward Caste communities, which might possibly become backward by the Mandal Commission's criterion. It is this suspension in the paradise of Trisanku,[3] wherein they have neither the benefit of being reckoned backward nor the numerical advantage of being enumerated forward, that really enraged them. They have, therefore, been digging up the censuses of 1921 and 1931, and taking a headcount of their ancestors to prove the numerical strength of the former and consequently of their own. Understandably, a lot of statistics are being cooked up in the process. Numerical accuracy is too fragile a force to stand up to the exigencies of social conflicts.

The Forward Castes have come up with the estimate that they constituted 33 per cent of the total population—and not 17.58 per cent as Mandal would have it—in the year 1921, and that therefore the BCs also constituted another 33 to 35 per cent of the population and not 52 per cent, as claimed by Mandal. They achieved this miracle by counting the entire heterogeneous kapu caste complex as Forward Castes, though half of those castes are backward according to the 1970 list. The truth is that notwithstanding the evident discrepancy between the Mandal Commission's well-defined criteria for identifying BCs and Muralidhar Rao's lack of any criterion at all, it turns out that the population estimates of Muralidhar Rao are reasonably accurate, entirely by accident and in spite of himself. A careful computation of the 1921 census shows that the Hindu BCs (as classified in 1970) constituted about 42 per cent of the population then.

To arrive at the current proportion, one should do the following three things: add the population of the Denotified Tribes as well as Backward Class Muslims and converted Christians; add the population of the nine new castes recommended for inclusion in the list of BCs by Muralidhar Rao; and take account of the likelihood that there has been a relative acceleration in the growth rate of the population of the BCs, since it is generally known that the population of the poor has had a higher growth rate than that of the rich in recent decades. If all these factors are taken into consideration, there is no doubt that the BCs would constitute more than 50 per cent of the state's population at present.

[3] Trisanku, a king in the Hindu mythological story Ramayana, is determined to ascend to *swarga* (heaven) with his mortal body. Brahmin saints like Vasishtha and the *devas* (gods) disregard this 'unnatural' request, but Trisanku is assisted in this task by kshatriya-saint Vishwamitra. As Trisanku ascends to heaven, the peeved gods led by Indra trigger his descent. Vishwamitra, taking this as an affront, arrests Trisanku's descent and suspends him midway, thereby creating a 'new heaven' called Trisanku swarga—a suspended state, a nowhere zone.

The Agitation

However, irrespective of whatever the facts are, it has been two months since the Forward Castes took to the streets. Officially all the political parties defend reservation, but on the sly, it is the leaders of their student and youth wings that are leading the agitation. This is particularly true of the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose student followers in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad constitute the bulk of the anti-reservation agitators, especially in the Telangana districts. The agitators have formed an organisation called the Andhra Pradesh Nava Sangharshana Samiti (APNSS), as well as a Parents' Association. It is obviously no accident that all this appears to have some resemblance to the Gujarat anti-reservation agitation.

Every reactionary social movement creates a myth that truly symbolises it, and justifies it in its own eyes and in the eyes of the prevalent normative presumptions. The myth generated by the anti-reservationists of AP centres around a patriotic concern for 'merit'. The brunt of their ideological attack is that reservation destroys 'merit'. The ontological status of this attribute called 'merit' is almost that of a physical substance which resides in different people in different quantities. It is actually the latent brahminism of our culture asserting itself. This 'merit' is measured accurately by the percentage of marks that a student gets in his examinations; due recognition to 'merit' is necessary if the nation has to progress; and conversely, everybody who has this 'merit' is an asset to the nation. There is no need to highlight the absurdity of these notions but they seem to be serving the purpose of legitimising the agitation in the eyes of those persons who would otherwise be unwilling to openly oppose reservation, regardless of whatever they may think of them at heart.

It is interesting to note that the anti-reservationists have chosen this myth in preference to certain more populist myths that they could have adopted instead like, for instance, the existence of a large body of lower middle class among the Forward Castes, who could also do with a helping hand from the state. In the beginning, it was argued for a while that reservation for BCs is depriving the poor among the Forward Castes of their educational and employment opportunities, an argument that sounded reasonable enough to attract many people. It so happened that at this time, an unemployed reddy youth committed suicide in Hyderabad. The press reported the news quite deliberately on the front page, and the anti-

reservationists made much of it, implying that he had been killed by the policy of reservation in jobs to BCs. But the focus of their arguments has primarily been on 'merit', how it is destroyed by reservation, and the harm done to the nation thereby. The emphasis on such a non-populist and elitist myth is probably due to the preponderance of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh outlook among the agitators, an outlook that is known to dislike socialism so much that it refuses to even be populist.

Corresponding to the myth they have chosen, the campaign of the agitationists, though physically at a low key, is quite vicious in the arguments and notions that it is spreading. All of a sudden, the Forward Castes have collectively become meritorious and the rest of the people incompetent. It seems as if Manu and Baudhayana[4] are resurrecting themselves with a vengeance, with the oddity being that the identity of the agents of the resurrection, most of whom would have been recognised as sudras by those worthy personalities, would scandalise the latter. The image of the BCs deliberately set up and propagated by the agitationists is that of worthless, incompetent people, sneaking up from behind and depriving brilliant and deserving youth of college seats and jobs, thereby destroying the nation's prospects of achieving greatness. Some of the slogans printed on the posters that they are carrying are quite offensive. In medical colleges, they have put up pictures depicting a BC medical graduate removing a tooth instead of an eye; their campaign claims that those who get seats and jobs through reservation make unreliable engineers and inefficient bureaucrats; and so on. And by way of relief, some of the slogans are amusing. One frequently printed slogan carries the plaint: 'Is it a sin to be born in a Forward Caste?' The sense of history inherent in the ironical justice of the question would strike any observer.

In spite of this latent viciousness in their campaign, agitationists are having a field day. The state is uncommonly benign, and the press is terribly friendly. Everything the agitationists do is described as 'imaginative', 'innovative', 'interesting', etc. Every day for the last two months, every newspaper has been carrying on the front pages photographs of the anti-reservationists doing all kinds of mundane things including taking out processions, sticking posters, deflating the tyres of police jeeps, polishing shoes and sweeping roads (which are among the novel agitational methods

[4] Manu and Baudhayana are figures associated with brahminical laws, the Dharmashastras. Manu is considered to be the author of the *Manusmriti* or the Laws of Manu dated to about 200 CE. Baudhayana, believed to pre-date Manu, is said to be the author of *Baudhayana Shrauta Sutra*. He is also said to be the author of the *Sulba Sutra* that prescribes mathematical rules for the construction of vedic altars.

invented by them), and so on. Their meetings and press conferences are reported in a most tendentious fashion. Rarely is so much appreciative commentary added to routine reporting in the daily press.

The Reactions

Two kinds of reactions to the agitation arouse interest, one that of the BCs, and the other that of the left. To put it simply, the BCs are ineffective and the left is groping around. The reasons perhaps lie in a proper understanding of what these anti-reservation agitations really signify. Reactionary social movements rarely mean what they say, nor signify what they pretend to represent. One of the failings of the left has always been that it discusses issues within the terms and parameters set by the opposition, instead of dissecting the terms of the discussion itself. As long as the discussion of the 'reservation question' keeps turning around unemployment among the lower middle class Forward Castes, the alleged monopolisation of the benefits of reservation by upper class BCs, or the question of 'merit', we may at best succeed in debunking a couple of myths, or salvaging our consciences by inviting all the poor to unite, irrespective of caste and creed. But we will never understand *why* the anti-reservation movements are picking up just now, why they are being sponsored and led by propertied people who have no real need of a government job, why the lower middle class Forward Caste youth running behind the anti-reservationists are unable to realise that getting rid of reservation will not solve their problem of unemployment because it will not create more jobs, why (as some progressives bemoan in frustration) nobody is able to realise that socialism is the only solution to the problem, not reservation nor 'open' competition. The active participation of girl students in the agitation is also certainly a rather unusual phenomenon. A bemused newspaperman, who sits at his desk receiving press notes, is struck by the fact that girl students are doing most of the running around for the anti-reservationists. These girls, he says, would not be able to pursue careers anyway, regardless of whatever be their aspirations. Many of them would not even get as far as applying for jobs; and it is difficult to believe that they are worried about the jobs-to-be of their husbands-to-be; human beings are rational but not so much. For the girls, especially these middle class Forward Caste girls, dowry and the macabre phenomenon called 'dowry deaths' are much more immediate problems that should, by common notions of human rationality, engage their attention more than reservation. And yet, he says, he has never seen them being one-tenth as active in an anti-dowry campaign.

Something else that has equally surprised observers is the inability of

the BCs to unite and defend their rights. Muralidhar Rao estimated that they constitute 52 per cent of the population. Even the most rabid upper caste estimate puts their number as higher than that of the upper castes. And yet, even as the APNSS of the upper castes is having a field day with its agitation, the counter-organisation floated by the BCs, the Andhra Pradesh Sama Sangram Parishad (APSSP) has not only failed to create any notable impression, but has actually split into two, and it remains to be seen whether the two factions put together would be any more effective than the original one. Unless one should interpret this too as lack of 'merit' on the part of the BCs, one must discover the reason for this oddity.

The reasons for the weak response of the BCs to the anti-reservation agitation appear to lie in: (a) the nature of the caste system (its real nature, not the meaningless brahmin–kshatriya–vaisya–sudra classification of the Dharmashastras), and (b) the pressures generated by the contemporary political economy. A large part of the history of India can be told in terms of the transformation of endogamous groups or communities (loosely called tribes) into castes. The caste continues to be endogamous, but the difference is that whereas the original community was an autonomous entity and functioned as a unit of production (including indulging in the primitive direct appropriation of the fruits of nature), enjoying relations of exchange with the surrounding society, the caste has a well-defined position within a larger unit of production. Each caste has an economic role for itself, though each economic activity is not served exclusively by just one caste. Since tribal communities are localised in their spread, it follows that it is most natural for castes to be localised and confined to small regions. This phenomenon is easily observable in the case of the BCs; among the hundred-odd BCs identified in AP, a very large number are confined to just one or two districts, or at most to an eco-historical region of the state.

However, two things happen at the point of and subsequent to the transformation. One is that the tribal community frequently splits into two, indicating a class division. A large number of castes, for instance, exist in pairs, one backward, and one forward, with the difference being indicated by a prefix. For instance there are two kinds of balijas, two kinds of kalingas, two kinds of velamas, etc. The upper sections take to trade/cultivation, and the lower sections remain food gatherers or become labourers. The next thing that happens is that among the upper sections of different communities spread across a large area, a class consolidation takes place, based primarily on substantial landholdings or substantial trade. The rich among the various localised communities-turned-castes consolidate across the board as a fresh grouping. But the original characteristic of endogamy is carried forward and reproduced in what is essentially a class formation, and so what should have become a class of substantial landholders becomes one more caste. This appears to be the genesis of all the dominant landed castes: the reddys and kammas of AP, for instance. There is no other way that one can account for the large spread of these castes across the state, in contrast to the localisation of the backward cultivating castes, unless one believes that the good Lord in his wisdom created the castes according to *guna* and *karma* as He says in the Bhagavad Gita.

Sometimes a secondary consolidation is attempted at a lower level, with the remaining middle level cultivating castes 'trying' to come together as another extensive caste; but in AP, at any rate, this secondary consolidation has remained incomplete. The munnurkapus, balijas, telagas, tenugus and mutrasis are collectively referred to as kapus, but the consolidation has not been consummated and the term kapu as often refers to the profession of cultivation as to a caste or a caste complex. (I believe the term jat has the same status in parts of the north.) In contrast, the consolidation has been quite successful in the case of the upper cultivating castes—almost entirely so with the kammas, but to a lesser extent with the much more heterogeneous reddys. The reddys of Rayalaseema do not intermarry much with those of Telangana (though there is no prohibition), and the reddys of Nellore district are generally regarded as a sociological species all by themselves.

It is this historical reality that lies behind the ability of the Forward Castes to attack reservation much more vigorously than the BCs are able to defend them. The difference is not merely in relative economic strength. The SCs are, on the whole, much poorer than the BCs, but 'untouchability' and the predominant occupation of agricultural labour have given them an identity cutting across the regions, which has enabled them to come together more effectively in times of need (as demonstrated in the aftermath of the Karamchedu killings of last July), than the BCs have been able to do now. The localisation of the cultivating BCs, in contrast to the wider spread of the landholding upper castes, by the very nature of their historical formation, is the reason why agitations against reservation for BCs—whether in Gujarat or in AP—have not met with effective resistance from the beneficiaries. This, needless to say, is only a disability and not a determinate impossibility.

It is against this backdrop of uneven caste formation that a certain amount of economic development has taken place during the post-Independence period. There has been some technological modernisation in agriculture and allied activities, and an attendant growth in trade, business and finance. A new rich class, based on landholding and trade, has grown

around this development. The basis of the enrichment of this class is certainly the possession of property, but the rich among the landholding upper castes have made full use of not only their substantial landholdings but also the wide spread of the upper castes, as a whole, to appropriate the fruits of this development, especially to entrench themselves in the political superstructure, which has grown over this process of development and which directs it. The caste connection has thus played a major role in apportioning the fruits of development in favour of the rich among the upper castes.

It is the children of these upper castes, along with the children of brahmin bureaucrats and professionals, who are leading the anti-reservation agitation today. It is not an accident that the richest among them congregate in the professional colleges of medicine and engineering, and it is here that the anti-reservation agitation has taken its most offensive and vicious form. Just as their fathers used the extensive presence of their castes to dominate the provincial economy and political power structure, the agitationists are today using the same extensive spread of their castes to build a strong agitation against reservation for BCs. The relatively localised BCs never had the capacity to consolidate over a large area and consequently, even the rich among them could never assert themselves in the economy and polity on par with the rich Forward Castes. Today, these BCs are equally and for the same reason handicapped in countering the agitation.

The arrogant self-assertion of the new rich provincial propertied classes is a notable phenomenon of recent years, and its footprints can be discerned in various spheres of social life and struggle. Anti-reservation agitations constitute one such sphere. In this essential sense, there is little difference between anti-reservation agitations and 'atrocities on harijans' as violent attacks on the rural poor are described by the press. While rising to dominance and riches, this new rich class used its extensive caste links to rope in its lower middle class caste-fellows as camp followers and voters to help it pull itself up, and now it is using the same lower middle class caste-fellows as foot soldiers in fighting the special privileges acquired by the BCs through prolonged struggles. The fascist possibilities inherent in a widespread and rapidly consolidating class of the new rich are familiar to history; and when this class is provided with an army of potential foot soldiers—even if they constitute only 17.58 per cent or somewhat more of the population—as a consequence of the unique history of this country, the danger becomes more serious.

The left would do well to recognise that this is where the essence of the matter lies, neither in the obviously spurious question of salvaging 'merit', nor in the seemingly more rational question of unemployment and consequent frustration among youth. Reality is the last thing that should be taken at face value. Its rationality is Hegelian, not positivist. It thus becomes the duty of the left to convince the lower middle classes among the Forward Castes, whose frustrations are as real as those of other poor people, to save themselves from becoming foot soldiers of fascism. If the left confines itself to clichés like 'reservation will not solve the problem of unemployment', and 'it is not caste but class that is decisive', it will only be fiddling tritely while the mohallas burn.

Enhancing Reservation

The Court Says 'No'

EPW, 20 September 1986

In a judgement delivered on 5 September, a full bench of the Andhra Pradesh high court held that the state government's Government Order (GO) enhancing the quota of reservation in jobs and college seats from 25 to 44 per cent for Backward Classes (BCs) was unconstitutional; the judgement rang down the curtain on a nearly two-month-long turmoil that had thrown everything out of gear in the state. The entire 'public opinion' of the state heaved a rather shameless sigh of relief, and in case that was not audible enough, all the newspapers without exception wrote editorials stating in black and white that the state government had better not appeal against the judgment in the Supreme Court. It was plainly their unanimous wish that the entire thing be forgotten as a bad dream. But chief minister N.T. Rama Rao (NTR) was in no need of such advice. He hastened to thank the high court for holding the GO only unconstitutional and not mala fide in its intentions as had been alleged, *inter alia*, by the petitioners; deduced the happy corollary that his government would not have to resign (for mere unconstitutionality of its acts, if such it is, is no ground for resignation of a government); and promised the increasingly strident anti-reservationists that he would not appeal in the Supreme Court but would abide silently by the high court's judgement. He invited them for talks immediately after the judgment was delivered, and it was only after he promised with an uncharacteristic humility to behave himself that the anti-

reservationists called off their agitation and walked out in jubilation into the streets that were still littered with the broken glass panes of the buses they had stoned during the last six weeks.

A purely legal analysis of the judgement can be left to pundits. It is not very clear how exactly a reservation quota of 25 per cent is not discriminatory, and not violative of Articles 15 and 16, but a quota of 44 per cent becomes unconstitutional. There is no quantitative restriction in Articles 15(4) and 16(4), which allows for special privileges to be given to BCs, and there is no justification for arbitrarily and irrationally deriving such a restriction from those exceptional clauses. How a total reservation of 50 per cent for all categories of beneficiaries put together is constitutional but anything more is not is a piece of wisdom that was advanced hesitantly ('speaking generally') by the Supreme Court in 1963,[1] and that everybody has been quoting for the last twenty-three years is also not very clear. More to the point, it is not apparent if the courts are right in arrogating to themselves the authority to decide not only upon the constitutionality of the principle of protective discrimination but also how much protection is constitutional and how much is not. Nor is there any rationality to the barrier of 50 per cent for total reservation. Why 50? Why not 49 or 51 or 70 for that matter? Let us recall here that the level of illiteracy in the country is 65 per cent, and that of rural poverty, 70 per cent, and as regards malnutrition, nobody knows the extent of its prevalence in this benighted land. Muralidhar Rao, the chairman of the one-man commission on Backward Classes, whose report led to the present fracas, adopted the method of estimating the proportion of BCs in the state's population, and deducting from this figure the proportion which he felt was in a position to compete on par with the Forward Castes, he recommended the remainder as the appropriate quota of reservation for the BCs. This procedure—howsoever shoddy Muralidhar Rao's calculations may have been—is rational and logical, in contrast to the prescription that total reservation should not exceed 50 per cent, which is entirely arbitrary and has no rational basis whatsoever. In any case, it is obviously a matter for the legislature to prescribe any such restrictions and not for the courts.

[1] *M.R. Balaji* vs *State of Mysore*, AIR 1963 SC 649, wherein the Supreme Court held that while the BCs were entitled to protective discrimination, such protective discrimination should not negate the right to equality and equal protection of law. It held that backwardness should not be determined by caste alone but by secular criteria, though caste could be one of them, and that the reserved seats in an educational institution should not exceed 50 per cent of the total number of seats.

Anti-Reservationists' Offensive

While leaving these considerations for experts to wrangle over, it is worth taking a bird's eye view of the events preceding and succeeding the judgement. Forward Caste students formed the Andhra Pradesh Nava Sangharshana Samiti (APNSS) almost immediately after the GO was issued. They began their campaign with a lot of circumspection, an inadvertent tribute perhaps to the long though chequered history of the left in this state. They made it very clear in the beginning that they were not opposed to reservation as such but only to the hike in the quota for BCs from 25 to 44 per cent; that their concern was with unemployment among Forward Caste educated youth; that the entire policy of reservation was an eyewash which did not benefit the really poor among the BCs; and so on. The press, in a rare exhibition of sensitivity, made it a point to describe their agitation by the unwieldy title 'anti-reservation hike' or 'anti-excess reservation' movement rather than the 'anti-reservation' movement. Reports in the press would invariably start with the lead, 'The students who are agitating against the hike in reservation'; not for one second would they allow the reader to forget that it was the 'hike' which was being opposed and not reservation as such.

The anti-reservationists went to the high court contending that the GO was violative of Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution, and obtained an interim order suspending the operation of the GO. Strengthened by this victory, they stepped up their offensive. Indeed, throughout this period, the more battles they won, the more aggressive they became, much to NTR's discomfiture. They quickly stopped making any distinction between reservation as such and a hike in the percentage of reservation. From unemployment, the argument shifted to 'merit'. It was argued incessantly that the policy of reservation was preventing meritorious students from getting college seats and jobs, and that thereby the nation was losing precious talent. They also turned somewhat violent, stoning buses, breaking glass panes, and so on. It was interesting to see, in a single day's newspaper, a news item on one page reporting violence by the anti-reservationists and on another page a ponderous editorial congratulating them for using non-violent methods and maintaining decorum. The press needed to invent the myth of a 'responsible and nonviolent' movement to cover up for its own blatantly partisan attitude and, therefore, it turned a blind eye to the sizeable violence—especially destruction of public property—that the anti-reservationists indulged in. Normally, the moment a contentious issue goes to court, the press advises the agitationists to give up their agitation and return to normal life, and 'let the law take its course'. Vague threats of the matter being subjudice are also uttered. But with the anti-reservation movement, the press was for once neither reporting nor just commenting, it had joined the battle; it realised perfectly well the powerful influence that a strong agitation out on the streets can have on proceedings inside a court hall. And so we saw the remarkable phenomenon of the press blandly reporting the agitation of the anti-reservationists and court proceedings in the case on the same page, day after day. Yet, when some BC youth demonstrated outside the houses of the judges *after* the judgement was delivered, that was universally condemned as contempt of the court and the judiciary.

Some incidents that occurred at Hyderabad on 3 September illustrate well the extent of the pressure concertedly built up by the anti-reservationist students, like-minded (meaning Forward Caste) government employees and the press, to coerce the government and perhaps intimidate the court, which had completed hearing the arguments and had to deliver the judgment in a couple of days. On that day, the anti-reservationists decided to picket the state secretariat, the administrative headquarters. It is rumoured that they chose children of the secretariat employees and officials to participate in the programme, and that these children left home that morning saying, 'Mummy, we are going to picket your office today.' It must be ages since anybody was last allowed to picket or even demonstrate anywhere near the vicinity of the state secretariat at Hyderabad. The APNSS was not only allowed to do so, but the police obligingly barricaded the street on both sides of the secretariat, stopping all traffic, and allowed the picketeers a field day. They even staged impromptu plays, sang songs and danced on a normally very busy road that had now been emptied for their convenience at the behest of an administration which they were supposedly fighting against. This went on for two full hours, in spite of the fact that the policing arrangements were under the supervision of the deputy commissioner of police (DCP), K.S. Vyas, a notoriously trigger-happy police officer. As superintendent of police, Nalgonda, it was he who had revived 'encounter' killings in 1981, and later as SP of the Vijayawada urban district, he created such a situation that the local Congress(I) leaders, of all the people, were driven to stage dharnas for civil liberties. But on 3 September, he was obviously following a different kind of instructions. The press, however, had an incredibly ingenious story to account for the unprecedented success of the picketeers. The latter had, according to the newspapers, adopted the brilliant tactic of arranging the girl students in a circle to form a ring around the picketeers, thereby preventing the police from getting at them, as if such delicate situations have ever stopped our police from having a go at agitations!

At the end of two hours of playful picketing, the DCP asked the students to disperse, telling them that they had had their pleasure. When the students refused, after some wrangling, the DCP ordered a lathi-charge. The girl students were beaten up. This annoyed the staff of the Secretariat who had gathered along the verandas of their offices to watch the fun; the parents were also naturally angry to see their children beaten. They started stoning the policemen from inside. The police commissioner is said to have received a serious injury on his face, an incident that would have, in different circumstances, led to large-scale police firing and deaths, but in this instance, the police entered the Secretariat and chased the employees inside. They ran in, straight to the chief minister, and abused him and gheraoed him, thereby perpetrating what was perhaps the most militant action during the last three years undertaken by a section of the public that has been the most ill-treated by NTR. He has always treated the government employees as almost personal enemies, and now they had their revenge, taking advantage of the strange docility displayed by the administration. They subsequently boycotted their offices for four consecutive days.

The next day's newspapers reported the entire incident as prominently as if it were akin to Jallianwala Bagh followed by the mutiny. And even as the judges must have been preparing and writing the judgements, the anti-reservationists impelled widespread bandhs and roadblocks across the state. At the Prakasam barrage across the Krishna river, a busy bottleneck along the Madras–Calcutta highway, a handful of students blocked traffic for nearly three hours on 5 September, as an obliging police force looked on, thereby holding up traffic for at least 50 km either way. And further down the highway, Forward Caste students of the Nagarjuna University squatted on the road and held up the heavy traffic for a further stretch. At Hyderabad, the Secretariat staff continued their boycott of work and agitation against the chief minister. That man must have been terribly frustrated in this peculiar inability to handle troublemakers by using his fascist instincts, as he is wont to do. And all the while, newspapers carried screeching headlines on every little thing that the anti-reservationists did. It was in this intimidating atmosphere that the full bench consisting of one Scheduled Caste judge, one Backward Caste judge and one Forward Caste judge with an established reputation for their progressive views, held that the enhancement of the quota of reservation was unconstitutional.

Unfortunate Arithmetic

The court struck down the GO on the principal ground that the Muralidhar Rao Commission's estimate of the population of BCs as comprising 52 per cent of the state's population was erroneous. It also expressed itself as being opposed to a reservation policy that reserves more than 50 per cent of jobs and seats. In arriving at its population figures, the court balanced the various estimates put forward by the Forward Caste petitioners and came to the conclusion that the proportion of BCs was about 35 per cent. Law and the Constitution apart, the numerical estimate is perhaps the most unfortunate part of the judgement. The court chose to completely ignore the detailed estimates provided by the state government, extrapolating from the 1921 and 1931 censuses, which showed that the BCs constitute at least 50 per cent of the population, at present; instead it blindly accepted the calculation of the anti-reservationists who added up all the kapu castes (many of which are BCs) to arrive at a highly inflated figure for the Forward Caste population and by elimination, therefore, a deflated estimate for the population of BCs. They put down this chicanery in cold print and distributed in the form of a leaflet in the name of the Prajabhyudaya Samiti, and subsequently repeated it in the petition they presented to the court. This was pointed out by the state in its reply. If the court even at that point had some doubts, it could have directed the government to conduct a caste-based census or at least an extensive sample survey to arrive at the proper population estimate. Instead, it chose to claim that it had balanced all the figures put forward before it and arrived at the figure of 35 per cent. If one is not overawed by the supposed wisdom of the judiciary, one cannot help recognising that any serious opinion in this regard would require: (i) a detailed study of the 1921 and 1931 censuses, which the court did not undertake, (ii) knowledge of the differential growth rates of the population of the different castes, about which no studies exist, and (iii) some elementary training in statistical analysis, which the judges do not have. In view of these considerations, the 'estimate' of the judges is no better than the jugglery indulged in by Muralidhar Rao, and is likely to be worse since it has been vitiated by the lack of partisan concern for the depressed that the latter had.

It is perhaps time for the entire matter to be taken out of the hands of the vagaries of judicial pronouncements. The courts are obviously being asked to do something that they have neither the constitutional authority nor the competence to do. Till now, the rulers of the country, unsure of the likely militancy of the beneficiaries of reservation, have been dithering and allowing the issue to drift with successive court judgments. In the prevalent anti-welfare, anti-populist and anti-poor atmosphere, the experience of Andhra Pradesh may well encourage the government to quickly bring forward legislation, perhaps an amendment to Articles 15(4) and 16(4), making the 50 per cent barrier to total reservation a legal upper limit. The

supremely confident stridency of the anti-reservationists was first exhibited in gandhian Gujarat and is now being repeated in a state with a significant left history. To complete the picture, we have the exhibition of a hapless reaction on the part of the BCs, both in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. This must have certainly opened the eyes of the rulers to the fact that in the absence of a proper political orientation, numbers do not count for much when they are on the side of the deprived, whereas power counts for a lot even on the side of a numerical minority.

The Real Victors

The left will dither as usual. Some of its members may even congratulate the courts and the government for recognising that it is not caste but class that matters. The left in India has always been remarkably large-hearted in identifying and complimenting radicalism wherever it exhibits itself and for whatever purpose. The real victors, in the eventuality of reservation taking a statutory beating, will be neither the lower middle Forward Castes, nor the principle of recognition for merit and competence, nor the sanctimonious aversion to pampering the weak too much, nor the theory of Marx as against that of Ram Manohar Lohia; the real victors will be the class of the provincial rich, the landlord–trader–contractor–broker class, which has over the years built itself strand by strand into the sinews and muscles of India's ruling classes. While building itself up, it has made full use of caste as a weapon and a tool. The propertied classes have never hesitated to use caste as a weapon in strengthening and reproducing class power; it is only the radicals who are worried about the fact that talking of caste damages the class struggle. There is not a single provincial politician, member of the legislature, chairman of a zilla parishad, director of a cooperative society, president of a rural bank, or a single contractor, supplier, trader, financier or broker who has not made essential use of his caste links to offer manpower, lung power and muscle power in order to facilitate his rise. Having done that, and even as they do that, they will not allow the backward and panchama castes to use their caste identity to obtain a miserable clerk's job or a college seat to get a worthless degree certificate.

This is the essence of the matter, and it will be a sad day when the left acquiesces silently with the attempt to legislate an upper limit of 50 per cent for reservation. If that is done, it will not be long before an assault is begun on each and every one of the welfare measures won by the poor by hard struggle. This scenario fits into an increasingly visible pattern, does it not?

Herald the Hunting Dogs that are Grey in Colour

EPW, 9 July 1988

May 1988 has been an eventful month for N.T. Rama Rao's government and his Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The sixth annual convention of the party—called Mahanadu by its obsessively tradition-conscious founder—was held on the banks of the Krishna river from 22 to 28 May. Heritage is perhaps a better word than tradition, for it is not so much the ritual form as the burden of *parampara* that weighs upon NTR. He sees himself as one who is carrying forward the heritage of all the kings who have ruled over the Telugu people during the last two thousand years. The institutions of the polity, of the administration and of his party are conceptualised and named after the erstwhile institutions. But of course, one must always consider the farcical element that is inevitable when history is forced to repeat itself.

The word mahanadu, according to historians of the Chola period[1] of South Indian history, stood for both a territory, and the periodic assembly of the dominant landed gentry of the territory. The gentry used to gather in an assembly—the mahanadu—once in a while to decide upon issues connected with the expenditure of the surplus extracted from the subordinate cultivators, and land grants to brahmins, temple construction, watercourses, distribution of cultivable wastes among aspiring cultivators,

[1] An imperial Tamil dynasty, which ruled in large parts of South India from tenth to twelfth centuries CE.

etc. At a period of history when the centralisation of authority in the kingdom was weak, it was these assemblies of the landed gentry that took decisions regarding people's lives and happiness. The fact that NTR chooses to call the annual assembly of his party Mahanadu is probably an unwitting piece of symbolism, but is nevertheless very apt.

However—and here the symbolism turns farcical—we are no longer living in a period of weak centralisation. The king is now an all-powerful man and it is he who takes decisions regarding people's lives and happiness, or about as much of it as he can with a landlord–contractor–trader class as his social base and a budget that is just about twice the size of the annual deficit in the union government's budget. And so, while the erstwhile mahanadu was not only a powerful body but also a corporate entity, NTR's mahanadu is a silly caricature. It is more a fair than a party congress. The assemblage spent much of the week-long session watching cockfights, bullock-cart races and assorted rural games; seeing NTR's films as well as what are called 'folk' cultural programmes from 8 a.m. till 12 noon each day in improvised theatres, of which there were as many as six; trying their hand at competitions in *rangoli* (for women), eating idlis and carrying grain bags on the back (for men), running races (for both sexes), and archery (for boys); amusing themselves at the miniature zoo comprising a tiger, a lion, a bear, a stag and a few other animals brought from the Hyderabad Zoo; and acquiring merit in the meantime by touching NTR's feet, if and when possible. The venue for the fair was along the banks of the Krishna river, at the border of the Krishna and Guntur districts. It was named Satavahanapuram, following the common historiography of Telugu nationalism, which considers the Satavahanas[2] as the first Telugu kings, though it is not clear what, if anything at all, was Telugu about them.

The administrative machinery of the Krishna and Guntur districts was mobilised on a large scale to equip Satavahanapuram with conveniences such as 3,000 electric lights of various kinds, two transformers and three emergency generators to light them with, 360 taps to provide water to human beings and cattle, a hundred toilets, six theatres, a stadium for games, a miniature zoo, umpteen arches and stalls and approach roads, and thatched huts built in accordance with traditional *vastu* principles for the leaders to rest and reside in. The departments of electricity, roads and buildings, public health, water works, civil supplies, and the police were mobilised in their entirety for this purpose. The collector of Guntur district, a young man named Jannat Hussain, who is known for his irascible temper that is directed impartially towards both the people and the politicians, was disinclined to force his administration into all this activity, which was not part of his duty. He was promptly transferred.

About the only serious thing that the delegates did during the weeklong assembly was to squabble over the nominations of office-bearers of the party and its mass organisations. But even this squabbling was within the limits of the legitimate: it was followers of the two sons-in-law who quarrelled, and both of them in the name of the father-in-law. The latter, however, has displayed an uncanny ability to play the two factions against each other, an ability that the late Indira Gandhi would herself have complimented for its dexterity. For a long time, the younger son-in-law, Chandrababu Naidu, then general secretary of the party, appeared to have a firm lead over the elder, Venkateswara Rao, who was only president of the youth wing. But suddenly the former was deprived of his post and the latter was made health minister. But before any conclusion can be drawn from this change, Chandrababu Naidu is back to prominence, nominated as chairman of the Karshaka Parishad, a 'farmers' body' floated by the government, which is likely to become a significant creation of NTR's reign.

Congressmen have expressed resentment that this body, which has official status and is likely to be entrusted with the task of overseeing the running of various agricultural and marketing institutions and schemes, is itself being run as if it were the farmers' wing of the ruling party. A Congressman has even approached the high court against the nomination of the chief minister's son-in-law for the chairman's post, and the high court has stayed any extension of his term beyond six months. Their fear is understandable, in the context of the rapid consolidation of the dominant landed classes, and every party's felt need to find a constituency for itself within this consolidation. NTR had a headstart in this matter from the very beginning, and the Karshaka Parishad can signify an important leap forward, unless he makes a hash of it as he is apt to.

All this really fits in well with the running of the party's annual congress in the manner of a village fair presided over by the benign gentry. The comedy, however, was relieved by a fear that haunted the TDP leaders throughout that week. It was the fear that the naxalites would attack the gathering and kill the leaders. The fear was substantiated by the incredible security arrangements made at public expense for the personal safety of the TDP leaders. On the day of the final public meeting on 28 May, the security was provided by 6,000 police personnel, including two officers of the rank of deputy inspector general of police, twenty-five superintendents

[2] The Satavahana dynasty is said to have ruled over parts of southern and central India for about 450 years from around 235 BCE onwards.

of police (SPs) and assistant superintendents of police, fifty deputy superintendents of police, 140 inspectors and 450 sub-inspectors. One does not know whether this list is confined to the visible policemen, that is, the khaki-clad variety, or it also includes the invisible armed men of the anti-naxalite squads. The reason shown for this heavy security was the retaliatory violence indulged in by the CPI(ML) (People's War) group after one of their young but prominent leaders, Daggu Rajalingam, was killed in an 'encounter' at Warangal on 11 May. The police broke open the door of the house in which he was staying and killed him as well as the householder, Santosh Reddy. His party members indulged in widespread arson in protest against this killing. They burnt down dozens of Road Transport Corporation buses, a few tahsil offices, railway stations, microwave stations and even a telephone exchange. Although up to that time—and even afterwards, for that matter—their targets had been marked by the quality of being inanimate (when the buses were being burnt, the passengers were asked to get down, and in quite a few cases, a touching flourish was added by distributing all the money in the conductor's bag among the passengers), the TDP leaders were not sure that it would remain so forever, and hence the security. Yet, it is strange that the police did not desist from 'encounter' killings at least for the duration of the Mahanadu, lest the situation were to get aggravated. On the contrary, five persons were killed in four 'encounters' during the Mahanadu week, even as apprehension was repeatedly being expressed of a naxalite plot of retaliation. One should infer either that the apprehensions were put on for public consumption or that the free hand given to the police during NTR's rule is so 'free' that it does not care for the convenience of the donor. Going by the evidence on hand, one is tempted to draw the latter conclusion.

Eighteen persons have been killed in fifteen 'encounters' this year, till the end of June. Of these, seventeen belong to the People's War Group and one, a youth named Sahadev Reddy of Sircilla, belonged to the CPI(ML) group, identified as the late C.P. Reddy. The boy was picked up by the police on 25 May, tortured severely during that day, and killed. It was announced that there was an 'encounter' on 26 May at Dharmaram village, wherein the 'extremists' tried to set on fire the *tendu* leaves being procured by the Forest Department, and Sahadev Reddy died in that 'encounter'. The students who demonstrated later at Hyderabad against this killing were lathi-charged and dispersed. The stories of the remaining seventeen deaths are variations on the same theme. Some were picked up, tortured and killed, some were confronted in an inconvenient position—sitting or sleeping in the open—and killed instantly, some were killed while running away, and some were trapped in houses behind closed doors, which were broken open, as in Rajalingam's case.

There were also a few persons—at least three as far as we know—who were tortured brutally and killed and even an 'encounter' was not announced. One was a lambada youth named Meghya of Mustyalapalli in Warangal district; he was picked up in December 1987 and tortured for a long period in detention. His father met the SP and petitioned for his son's safety. On 23 January, the boy died, and the police hanged the dead body with his own shirt from an electric transformer in the middle of Warangal town. They let the body hang there as a public threat for more than twelve hours before taking it down and announcing that some unfortunate youth had committed suicide in a most novel fashion. When the boy's father met the SP again, the gentleman told him, 'We have sent your Meghya to the clouds (*megh*)'. The second person killed after being tortured was Bhikshapati, also of Warangal district, whom the CPI claimed as their activist. The police, however, claimed that he was an 'extremist'. He was also picked up at the end of last December, and a few weeks later, his dead body with its face chopped out of recognition was discovered in a shallow well. The third such victim was Rajender, a one-time activist of the PWG. He was picked up by the police of Peddapally, and a few days later, his dead body was found in the fields outside his village.

Naturally, therefore, the TDP leaders had cause to fear an attack during Mahanadu. The press also pestered them to announce their policy for tackling the naxalite 'menace', as it is called. Since the leaders of our country have not yet learnt to honestly tell the press that they do not have a policy when they do not actually have one, there were random pronouncements during that week from the chief minister, the home minister, the chief secretary, and the DGP. The stated content of the policy varied from person to person, depending upon the extent of the need that each felt to be populist and to which each could afford to be populist. NTR, who refuses mulishly to acknowledge that he made a mistake during his innocent first days in calling the naxalites patriots and asking them to join him in his effort to capture the Lal Qila (Red Fort), continued to say that he would invite them for talks. The home minister, however, clarified that the invitation would not be extended to the PWG but only to the other groups; his own inclination, however, was against any talks with any of them, for he said simultaneously that all of them would be wiped out in a year's time. The officials, for their part, would say nothing about the talks but reiterated their decision to ask for more sophisticated weapons and gadgets: there was talk of imparting commando training to the police, equipping them

with vehicles and wireless sets worth Rs 2.5 crore, requesting the Centre to send some more Central Reserve Police Force personnel, and giving the police permission to use grenades. Buta Singh,[3] who visited Hyderabad during this period for attending the meeting of the Southern Zonal Council, promised help without committing himself to anything in particular. The police officials also talked cryptically of a 'well-knit strategy' and a 'coordinated plan', whose details, of course, could not be divulged.

However, one concrete decision emerged from all this confusion. This was the decision that an 'elite corps of police' would be formed to fight the naxalites. A force of one thousand—an oversized battalion—would be constituted and would be named 'Greyhounds'. This was announced on 6 June and was widely publicised in the press. The Telugu press quite unnecessarily rendered the name of the breed into Telugu with the unseemly translation 'hunting dogs that are grey in colour', one of them going to the extent of inventing the Sanskritised title 'Dhusravarna Jagilam'. The police themselves would not have found this very amusing, since 'dog' is the common abuse that militant political activists have always used to describe policemen. However, they will probably take comfort from the promise that 'this elite force is to be equipped with modern weapons, bulletproof jackets and other special equipments', as an official press release puts it. The consequences of this creation, if it ever takes place and is let loose in the villages and the forest areas, can be imagined.

[3] Then union home minister in the Rajiv Gandhi government.

An Ideology for the Provincial Propertied Class (I)

EPW, 5 September 1987

This collection of articles[1] in English and Hindi is polemical in a rather uncomplimentary sense. Even those who agree with the arguments put forward in the articles would find it difficult to commend them for their competence in either argument or exposition. Perhaps the only exception is Kishan Patnaik's forthright and pungent article, '*Baudhik Adhoorapan aur Kisan Andolan*'. Some of the other articles provide accounts of the 'peasant' movements of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Haryana; some of them disclose in startlingly plain language the politics of these 'peasant' movements; and some of them expound their purported philosophy, ideology and theoretical presumptions with a simple-mindedness that would be charming in the right place.

If farmers who grow commercial crops or a surplus of foodgrains want remunerative prices—or more—for their output, there is no reason for anyone to find it surprising or immoral. Being at the receiving end of what may be loosely but fairly described as 'monopoly in the purchase of their inputs', and at the giving end of what may be equally loosely but equally fairly described as 'perfect competition in the sale of their output', even a textbook economist cannot object if they find no choice except to agitate

[1] A review essay of *The Peasant Movement Today*, edited by Sunil Sahasrabudhey (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1986), pp. xix + 224, Rs 150.

at both ends. The 'peasant movements' that constitute the subject of this book, therefore, offer nothing much in themselves to comment about. What makes them remarkable is the political and philosophical themes woven around them with varying degrees of realism, which also implies varying degrees of wish fulfilment.

Perhaps the most real and significant political theme is the notion of the absolute and unbreachable oneness of the village. This is no 'peasant unity' against landlords, itself a much controverted concept; instead it goes further. The entire village is one; it is Bharat for Sharad Joshi[2] and *bahishkrit samaj* for Sunil Sahasrabudhey (*'Kisan Andolan ka Aitihasik Sandarbha'*), the editor of the volume. It is the internal colony of this country, exploited by the towns, variously described as India (with the accent on the whole word, if you get the meaning) or *pashchimikrit* (Westernised) *samaj*. 'The leaders and sympathisers of the movement see the basic cause: in the state of affairs which allow or perpetrate the exploitation of the peasantry by the urban industrial elite, of the competitive farm sector by the monopolistic industrial sector, of the raw materials in favour of the finished products, of the labour-intensive sphere of production in favour of the capital-intensive sphere of production and of the indigenous people by the Westernised few' ('Brief Summary', Sunil Sahasrabudhey). 'The farmers' movement today is presenting a new point of view. The reason for our poverty is the domination of urban industrial India over the rural Bharat' ('Modern Science: A "Universal" Myth', Ashok Jhunjhunwala).

Girish Sahasrabudhey makes things a little more explicit: 'in all the farmers' agitations that are today taking place in various states of the country it is explicitly recognised that the poverty of rural areas is based not on exploitation within but without the agricultural economy' ('The New Farmers' Movement in Maharashtra'). The mechanism of exploitation is the payment of unremunerative prices for the output of Bharat. 'The movement has attempted to show that underpinning the agricultural produce is the chief mechanism of exploitation of the peasantry' ('Brief Summary', Sahasrabudhey). Sharad Joshi is much more forthright. 'The post-independence economic development policies are essentially aimed at mobilisation of the agricultural surplus for the formation of capital necessary for the industrial development' ('Scrap APC—Demand Farmers', Sharad Joshi).

[2] Farmers' leader and founder of Shetkari Sangathana, Maharashtra, which works 'to secure for all farmers freedom of access to market and technology'.

Protesting too much

There are four implications that would follow immediately from the logic employed unanimously by all the contributors: (i) that there are no exploited or poor people in towns, (ii) that there are no exploiters in villages, (iii) that all the 'villagers' have essentially the same interests, which find their economic expression in remunerative prices for that part of the produce that is sold in the market, and (iv) that the rural–urban divide is absolute and that no 'villager' has urban interests. The contributors would have no difficulty with the first of these four implications, for though there is little explicit mention of the urban poor, it would in no way breach their logic to admit them into Bharat; but of course, the 'poor' are defined not as all those who sell or mortgage their labour power, for that would include the organised working class for which the ideologues of these 'peasant' movements have a particular dislike. Nor are they so vulgar as to define the poor in terms of income. They would perhaps include the workers of labour-intensive–technologically-traditional–unorganised urban industry in their Bharat or *bahishkrit samaj*.[3] So far so good! The real difficulty comes with the rest of the implications. They express their vehemence so noisily on the second and third points that one is forced to suspect that they are protesting too much. So much noise can only be a cover-up for a myth that is ostensibly being built up and projected. And the pugnacity with which this projection is being attempted is such that they will not even allow themselves the convenience of identifying a comprador class or a fifth column for India inside Bharat.

If capital-intensive–industrial–Westernised 'India' is plundering Bharat, then even a cursory glance at Bharat would reveal quite a number of quislings whose life and production styles are in no essential sense different from those of 'Indians'. In view of the ease with which radical critics could demolish this myth, it would be the most natural thing for these ideologues to at least formally distance themselves from these, shall we say, compradors. Nevertheless, they seem to have resisted the temptation to do so, and persist in bluntly and repeatedly declaring that there are no class differences inside the village. On the contrary, they identify the village as the cardinal point of difference between their 'peasant' agitations and the peasant struggles that have occurred in the past by claiming that while the latter were struggles that took place *within* the village between various rural classes, their agitations are instead struggles between the village as a unit, on the one

[3] A banished/excommunicated section of society.

hand, and the urban world, on the other. And the 'heroism' they display by advancing such claims tells a tale of its own.

Could it be that the most vociferous of these bahishkrits are precisely those who have one foot in India and the other one in Bharat? And—apart from these fifth columnists—the substantial core of these 'peasant' movements are those who would brook no talk of class differences, let alone antagonism, between those who produce a surplus of foodgrains and those who produce none or indeed only consume them; much less between landholders and landless labourers. One suspects that this forces the ideologues into expounding a crude theory of village unity, against their own better judgement. Among all the contributors, Surendra Suman ('*Kisan Samasya Sabhyata ka Sankat*') alone is honest enough to admit that the whole thing is rather dubious; it is perhaps no accident that his region of study is Bihar, a state wherein there is the least possibility of pretending that the whole village is one. He confesses that among the 'peasants', there are some who even possess aircraft of their own, a circumstance that should have led him and the other participants of the seminar to ponder a little as to whether the word 'peasant' means anything at all, and if so, precisely what. Instead, he invents the apology that 'therefore it is not easy to grasp the reality of peasant problems on the basis of mere economic considerations', and goes on to postulate that it is a question of one civilisation against another, namely, the dominant (urban) civilisation versus the dominated and rejected (rural) civilisation. This obviously takes us quite far from the issue of remunerative prices for marketed foodgrains, which is a mere 'economic' consideration, but then the more a situation requires an ideology to mystify it, the farther that ideology would be from the reality it mystifies. This is indeed the law by which the cognition of reality loses its veracity to various degrees and becomes a piece of mystification.

Piece of Mystification

The truth is that let alone village unity, even the rural–urban divide makes only qualified sense in today's India. It makes sense for the rural poor for whom the urban world is often inaccessible, alien, and a source of plunder and oppression. It is a different matter with the rural rich, who are as class coextensive with the urban trader–professional–financier–contractor class. It makes much more sense for purposes of political analysis to talk of this entire class as one—the provincial propertied class—notwithstanding all the differences and contradictions that they contain among themselves, than to isolate one segment and call it the 'rich peasantry', much less to club this 'rich peasantry' with the rest of the village and talk of the village as opposed to the towns and cities. Kripa Shankar ('Should Agricultural Prices Be Raised?') need not feel surprised to discover that the rich farmers who agitate for remunerative prices have 'by and large not directed the movement against the machinations and loot of the traders'. Even a casual acquaintance with changing reality would reveal that a substantial part of (especially) the gram trade has passed from the traditional trading communities to castes which are associated with landholding. Today's India is not the India of the Deccan Riots of the mid-nineteenth century.[4] The upper sections of the landholders are no longer unequivocally opposed in their interests to the urban traders.

A typical family of this provincial propertied class has landholding in its native village, cultivated by hired labour, bataidars,[5] tenants or farm-servants and supervised by the father or one son; business of various descriptions in towns—trade, finance, hotels, cinemas and contracts—managed by other sons; and perhaps a young and bright child, who is a doctor or engineer or maybe even a professor in one of the small-town universities that have sprouted all over the country during the last two decades. It is this class that is most vocal about injustice done to 'villages'. Their irate declamations can be heard in the staff rooms of our provincial universities, though they mostly do not have what it takes to tackle the traditional marxists or the liberal intellectuals who live in Delhi or Calcutta. But now that Rajiv Gandhi's Navodaya schools are coming up all over the country—precisely to convert the children of this class into at least good imitations of the metropolitan public school products—we may soon have a more sophisticated critique of India's domination of Bharat; if the critics are by then as *pashchimi* as the favoured children of India, then that would only expose the shallowness of this debate.

It is only an apparent paradox that it is precisely the rise of this class, which is straddling rural and urban India, that is the cause of all this India–Bharat fuss. The Indian state had itself created this class in an attempt to strengthen its support base. If we are to talk of appropriation of agricultural surplus to feed industry, then (to the extent that it is not a very partial

[4] The Deccan Riots of May–June 1875 by peasants of western India (today's Pune, Satara and Nagar districts in Maharashtra) targeted conditions of debt peonage (*kamiuti*) to moneylenders. The rioters' sought to obtain and destroy the bonds, decrees and other documents in the possession of the moneylenders. Deccan refers to the peninsular plateau south of river Narmada though the 1875 riots did not spread to all of southern India.

[5] Bataidars are sharecroppers in agriculture in Bengal and Bihar.

depiction of reality), it is a phenomenon as ancient as industrialisation; if the reaction has nevertheless come up only during the post-1970 period, that is precisely because it is during this period that the attempts of industry to link itself with agriculture, not just by taking over its products to feed its workers but also by providing inputs to increase that production, achieved some kind of fruition. In other words, it is the success (howsoever limited) in incorporating a segment of Bharat into India that has led to the generation of this ideology of Bharat vs India as an absolute divide.

Source of Oppression

This is no argument against the ideology as such, but it does tell us a lot about its politics. In some parts of the country, these 'peasant' movements are taking up a wide range of rural problems and, therefore, appear quite democratic to observers. But if one has to go to the root of the matter, one must recognise in them—at least in one significant aspect if not in their essential core—a potential source of suppression of the rural poor. This can be seen in regions where the rural poor are organising themselves militantly, in the viciousness with which ideas such as 'village unity' are put forward by gun-toting landlords, and the rage with which the concept of class struggle is opposed. One can also perhaps hear echoes of it in the last sentence of Kishan Patnaik's article (*'Baudhik Adhoorapan aur Kisan Andolan'*). Can we not be bold enough to conclude that the activities of those who are thoughtlessly calling for class struggle in the villages and dismembering village society in the process actually help the interests of monopoly capital? Or one can see it refracted in the peculiar historiography of Sunil Sahasrabudhey (*'Kisan Andolan ka Aitihasik Sandarbha'*), who sees the ancestry of these struggles of the alleged bahishkrits, not in the anti-zamindar, anti-landlord and anti-moneylender struggles of the peasantry in colonial India but exclusively in the nationalist movement of the Congress during 1920–47 ('The politics of *bahishkrit samaj* entered history with Gandhi'). It has perhaps not struck Sahasrabudhey as ironical that the class struggles of the peasantry of the past, which he would rather not recognise, are, in many cases, quite literally the genealogical ancestors of these 'peasant' struggles whose ideologue he has set out to be. Sharad Joshi's followers in Maharashtra will certainly count among their great grandparents participants of the anti-Mahajan Deccan Riots of the nineteenth century. The fact that their preferred historiography chooses to disown this ancestry is an intriguing tale all of its own.

Perhaps the village of Karamchedu in Andhra Pradesh testifies to this duality rather neatly. The village became known two years ago for one of

the worst killings of harijans[6] in recent times. In 1980, farmers of this rich tobacco-growing village agitated for higher prices for tobacco, and two youth of their families got killed in police firing during the agitation. It was the youth of precisely the same tobacco farmers' families who had assaulted the madigas *en masse* in 1985, brutally murdered six men and raped three girls, all because the madiga labourers had become uppity in recent years.

If this is the main political message that comes across in the pages of this book, there is an aside that a student of ideas will find interesting or at least amusing. This is the peculiar theology, mythology and even some poetry that has collected around this very mundane business of remunerative prices for farm produce. Gandhians vending satyagraha as the only mode of struggle appropriate to 'our' culture, critics of science as being oppressive per se, and believers in an absolute form of cultural exclusivity, have rather oddly and most illogically found in these peasants' struggles a happy pasture for breeding their ideas. The farmers who want remunerative prices would themselves perhaps not be very excited by most of these ideas, and indeed would even be hostile to some of them like the partiality for natural as against chemical fertilisers. Indeed, the actual struggles of these 'peasants' have not been particularly gandhian, irrespective of whatever advice Ikhakur Das Bang (*'Kisan Andolan ka Ran-Niti'*) may be pleased to give them. And far from rejecting 'Western' culture and science, they are well integrated into a pattern of production based on chemical fertilisers, diesel- or electric-powered machinery and high-yielding varieties of seeds; and a pattern of consumption which imitates that of the pashchimikrit samaj—including access to TV sets, motor vehicles and all the rest of the trappings. Indeed, the cultural determinism and exclusivity, leading to a critique of science as being oppressive per se and exploitative, peddled by the neo-gandhian disciples of Dharampal,[7] is simultaneously the dominant theme of this collection and also the most incongruous one. When Ashok Jhunjhunwala ('Modern Science: A "Universal" Myth') says that 'the farmers' movement today is presenting a new point of view, the reason for our poverty is the domination of urban industrial India over the rural Bharat', he has all these 'farmers' with him. But when he goes on to add in the next paragraph that this point of view has raised many questions, in particular about the

[6] The word dalit was not as popular then as it is today. In fact, after the Karamchedu killings, the Scheduled Castes insisted that they be addressed as dalits.

[7] Dharampal (1922–2006) advocated a quest for 'indigenous science' 'untarnished' by colonial modernity. Some of his works include *Indian Science and Technology in the Eighteenth Century: Some Contemporary European Accounts* (1971) and *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (1995).

role of modern science in our country, and then goes on to answer that this role has been one of eroding the self-reliance of the village and concludes that the farmers' struggle may have to be 'directed against the whole process of modernisation', he is addressing an unsympathetic audience. The 'farmer' wants modern technology, all of it that he can get, and as cheaply as he can get it. The self-sufficiency of villages has no doubt been eroded by modernisation but as far as the rural rich are concerned, it has increased their wealth and power. It is sheer nonsense to say that 'our rural areas [have] hardly benefited materially' from agricultural modernisation. Regardless of whatever the gross figures may say—and even this remains controversial—the bigger landholders *have* indeed benefited a lot. And the farmers' movement is as much an assertion of their newfound power as it is a demand for still greater benefits. Its authentic tone is the one used by Sharad Joshi ('Scrap APC—Demand Farmers'),[8] who has no use for gandhian *ran-niti*, cultural exclusivity or philosophical opposition to modern science and technology.

Here, it is also perhaps appropriate to make a few comments on the attitude of these ideologues towards what they call 'modern science'. Science is many things simultaneously—a body of empirical knowledge, a corpus of techniques, an explanatory system, a method of cognition, and an epistemology. It also carries with it a worldview. It has grown and developed within the pores of capitalist society, and carries the birthmarks in the kind of facts it has discovered—and forgotten—and most importantly, in the techniques it has invented. But when these ideologues paint science as being oppressive per se, it is not this reality that they are depicting but a highly distorted version of it. When C.V. Seshadri and V. Balaji ('Is Science Value-Neutral: A Study in the Notion of Concept as Value and Value as Concept') put the blame on the Second Law of Thermodynamics for a range of exploitative and oppressive practices and institutions—from the eviction of tribals from forests to the manufacture of alcohol in preference to yeast and the replacement of manure by chemical fertilisers—the absurdity of the distortion becomes all too evident.

[8] APC is an acronym for Agriculture Prices Commission.

Ideology for the Provincial Propertied Class?

Gail Omvedt and Chetna Gala

EPW, 7 November 1987

K. Balagopal's review of *The Peasant Movement Today* (5–12 September 1987) is a sad example of a tendency to condemn the farmers' movement and its ideology without a real investigation of what is going on. There is very little of an independent peasant movement in Andhra Pradesh, and Balagopal's characterisation is based on his reading of a heterogeneous collection of writings by various sympathisers of the movement. Our comments are based on our experience, mainly in Maharashtra.

Balagopal writes:

> There are four implications that would follow immediately from the logic employed unanimously by all the contributors: (i) that there are no exploited or poor people in towns, (ii) that there are no exploiters in villages, (iii) that all the 'villagers' have essentially the same interests, which find their economic expression in remunerative prices for that part of the produce that is sold in the market, and (iv) that the rural–urban divide is absolute and that no 'villager' has urban interests.

But this is a construct.

At the Chandwad women's session of the Shetkari Sanghatana [in 1986], not only was women's exploitation declared to be essentially separate (the first real step away from the one-point programme), but it was also clearly stated in *Shidori*, a booklet which sold ten thousand copies that day, to

peasants and not to an intellectual audience—that 'Bharat' included the footpath and slum-dwellers of the cities, while the 'peasant leaders' of the villages were part of 'India'. When Sharad Joshi stated, 'I have never said that the Bharat–India divide was a village–city one,' it surprised many of us who have come out of a left movement which has always said that according to the farmers' movement 'Bharat' = villages, 'India' = cities. So we went back and checked to see if there was a change in the presentation of the movement. Instead we found that at least in all the printed Marathi booklets of Sharad Joshi (which were often taken from talks at mass *shibirs* of the movement) 'Bharat' was always defined as including 'refugees from the villages in the cities', while the elite/rulers of the villages were classed as part of 'India'. 'Bharat versus India' is a populistic phrasing, but it is the left and its intellectuals who have defined it continuously in oversimplified terms as village versus city. Most of the peasants we met and discussed with at Chandwad and elsewhere interpreted it in more straight 'class' terms, the rich versus the poor, the (mainly urbanised) comfortable middle classes versus the toilers. Sharad Joshi, and probably other theorists of the movement, have never denied that there is inequality in the villages; they have only argued that the *main* exploiters of the peasants are the urban capitalists and the state, and that organised industrial workers—not unorganised workers—share in the profits of that exploitation.

We may not agree that even skilled and organised industrial workers are unexploited, or that they share in the profits of the exploitation of others. But marxists do have to grapple seriously with the problem posed by the current situation of the large factory-based industrial working class in the world in relation to the rest of the toiling classes (the rural and urban informal sector). In fact, one way of understanding 'Bharat versus India' is as the unorganised versus the organised sector. Looking at the situation in terms of income (is this 'vulgar'?) it might be noted that the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy shows that in 1981 the average annual income per worker in the organised sector was Rs 10,851; for unorganised sector agricultural labourers it was Rs 1,703; for unorganised sector non-agricultural wage earners it was Rs 4,871; for peasants it was Rs 3,000; and for self-employed non-cultivators it was Rs 5,066. What does this show us? Where, even in India, is the 'proletariat' which has 'nothing to lose but its chains'?

All marxists talk of 'class' but often without much rigour in its analysis. Those who, like Balagopal, agree that peasants have surplus extracted from them through the terms of trade apparently do not think about what this means in terms of the class character of the peasantry. Marx himself did

not always see landholding as the basis for the class definition of the peasants. In 'Class Struggles in France' he wrote of the French peasantry that 'their exploitation differs only in *form* from the exploitation of the industrial proletariat' and 'the smallholding of the peasant is now only the pretext that allows the capitalist to draw profits, interest and rent from the soil, while leaving it to the tiller of the soil himself to see how he can extract his wages.' Doesn't this have some significance for analysing rural India today?

Balagopal's critique of the gandhian 'historiography' shown in the English literature on the peasant movement is a point well taken. But it is too bad he does not know the Marathi literature, which is what is relevant for 'Sharad Joshi's followers in Maharashtra'. Much of the presentation here of the 'historiography' of the peasant movement begins with tribal anti-imperialist revolts, and it takes the main predecessor of the movement to be—not Gandhi, and not the Deccan riots either—Jotiba Phule's satyashodhak revolt of the nineteenth century, which expressed the exploitation of the peasantry both by brahminism and imperialism, and took form as a movement against *shetji–bhatji* domination.

Balagopal's movement is against the state. Who does he see as its allies? Or are all others, even if they also fight the state, only counter-revolutionaries? He writes of Karamchedu that in 1980 when farmers agitated for higher prices of tobacco two youth got killed in police firing: 'It was youth of precisely the same tobacco farmers' families who assaulted the madigas *en masse* in 1985, brutally murdered six men and raped three girls.' Are 'contradictions among the people' always pleasant? We would like to remind Balagopal that so many of the working class men who are brutalised by capitalism are responsible for beating and murdering their wives. Still we are urged not to see them as enemies and we do not. Should we not be able to hold the same expectations of others? Needless to say, contradictions among the people should be handled in such a way that the most exploited among them—dalits, women, etc—will be able to make significant gains.

But isn't it time to think seriously about how to do this, and how alliances of popular forces will be built? It seems Babasaheb Ambedkar was not so sentimental on this issue as many 'marxists'. He was wary about linguistic states because he knew they would become politically dominated by the big 'peasant' castes (marathas, kammas, etc) who were often the direct opponents of dalits; yet he supported the Samyukta Maharashtra movement on the grounds that the left alliance fighting for it would go on to take up the cause of the rural poor. He also put forward the task of fighting casteism

as a central part of such an alliance: isn't it a fact that even today both the farmer's movement *and* Marxist-Leninists are ambivalent on this?

It is sad that an activist like Balagopal seems to disdain the involvement of masses in the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra, both in conferences and in agitations against the state. Were the lakhs of cotton farmers who participated in rasta and rail rokos in December and January, or the three lakh people who gathered at the 5 September conference at Satara simply being fooled and misled by a provincial elite? If leftists want to define the Shetkari Sanghatana as 'rich peasant' in terms of its leadership, then they should be able to say something about the structure of the organisation, about its district and provincial organisers, about who runs its training camps, and what kind of process is going on. Or shall we make a characterisation in terms of programme? Then what about the largest section of landless in the rural areas—women? At a Women's Studies conference in Warangal in 1981, women activists raised the question of why party-led *kisan sabhas* had not supported the rights of peasant women to the inheritance of land. There was very little response. It is still unclear if the Ryotu Coolie Sanghams have taken any such stand. But the Shetkari Sanghatana has taken a very clear position. Then where is the 'rich peasant' leadership and where is the 'proletarian' leadership?

Undoubtedly there are big differences between Maharashtra, where the Shetkari Sanghatana is the biggest mass movement but divorced from political power, and Andhra Pradesh, where so many of Balagopal's colleagues in the peasant movement are being tortured and killed by a state at least partly in the hands of a village-based goonda elite. But Balagopal seems to be letting his bitterness about the repression and his concern for the poorest of the rural poor overcome his ability to analyse the conditions and movements of the exploited masses. We had also been prey to this tendency in the past. It is neither a revolutionary nor a scientific marxist characteristic.

An Ideology for the Provincial Propertied Class (II)

EPW, 12 December 1987

I was reviewing a book and not the activities of the Shetkari Sanghatana (*EPW*, 5–12 September). I do not think I referred to that organisation even once in the review. Sharad Joshi is mentioned only because there is an article of his in the book and my comment was only on his article, and not on the movement he leads. What I was trying to convey in the review is that we are witnessing the consolidation of a certain class in the 'districts', the class which I have, with deliberate vagueness, called the 'provincial propertied class', as I do not wish to use the more usual variant, the 'regional bourgeoisie' because of all that the expression conveys in the light of European history. And I was trying to say that the opinions expressed in the articles under review collectively constitute an ideology that perfectly suits the consolidation of this class. This is not, by itself, a comment on the 'farmers' movements', though there is much that one can say about those movements in the light of this understanding.

However, by making this statement, I will not try to evade the obligation to put on record my political views regarding the important points raised by Gail Omvedt and Chetna Gala (*EPW*, 7 November). However, moral obligation notwithstanding, it is necessary to discuss these issues because they are central to any breakthrough in the stagnant conditions of the Indian revolution. (The fact that I say *the* Indian revolution is itself a political

opinion and not just a conventional expression, as Omvedt and Gala would be among the first to point out.)

Contradiction Among the People?

To begin at a convenient point, I do not think that Karamchedu represents a 'contradiction among the people'. One cannot prove the point by counting the number of the dead and the raped; the fact that six men and three women suffered these fates, respectively, does not by itself mean that it is not a contradiction among the people. I am aware of this. But, equally, one cannot prove the point the other way around by computing the landholding statistics of the assailants. It has always been the poor who have fought the battles of the rich. All the world's armies have been made up of half-starved men, who have left half-starved families behind. The fact that these foot soldiers are not enemies of each other is obvious in the case of mercenary and professional armies, but it is equally true of men who have gone on a rampage under the thrust of a conviction, irrespective of whether the conviction consists of religious bigotry, caste arrogance or feudal attachment to a landlord.

In other words, it is true that most of the assailants of Karamchedu (and all other Karamchedus) are what one may loosely call 'middle peasants'. We all unanimously agree that this should not happen, and that they do not belong to the other side. But how they can be brought over to this side is a question that, to begin with, hinges on our understanding of what they are doing on the other side in the first place. There are two possible answers to this question: one, the middle peasants, exploited through unequal terms of trade and uneven investment of resources by the urban capitalists (including the imperialists) and the state, take out their angst on the dalits by beating them up and killing them once in a while. In Karamchedu, for example, unremunerative tobacco cultivation can be said to have caused the killing. The analogy which Omvedt and Gala draw with the oppressed worker taking out his angst on his hapless wife is quite apt. However, if we take *this* as the essence of the matter, it becomes a contradiction among the people. It becomes a peasant vs labourer contradiction, and any other class that may exist in rural India becomes irrelevant to our understanding of these conflicts. It is also irrelevant that though tobacco is grown all over the Guntur and Prakasam districts, the only two villages where murderous attacks have taken place in recent times (Karamchedu in Prakasam and Neerukonda in Guntur) are native villages of rich and influential men in the state's power structure: N.T. Rama Rao's son-in-law in one case, and a minister of his cabinet, in the other.

And then, of course, the only political line open to us is to unite the peasants and the labourers against big capital, the state and imperialism. Of course, there can still be differences over many other questions: do we envisage a revolutionary alternative or a more humane settlement of the terms of existing social relations? If the former is true, then what is the nature of the alternative we seek? What is the strategy of the struggle? Under whose (class) leadership will the struggle take place?, and so on. But, regardless of which path we choose, there will be a general de-emphasising of wage and land struggles, because they tend to divide rather than unite the landless and the landed. Instead, issues like remunerative prices—with the promise that labourers would get better wages if the farmers get better prices—for agricultural produce, anti-state issues like irrigation, drought and social amenities, and anti-capital issues like high cost and inappropriate technology, deforestation and destruction of the environment, would be taken up. And attempts would be made to overcome existing divisions between the landless and the landed; for instance, casteism would become a 'central question' as Omvedt and Gala emphasise.

This is one possible answer to our dilemma. To seek a second answer is not to reject the importance of any of the individual issues enumerated above; it is not the issues of agitation that we are objecting to, but the political perspective of the agitation. In order to seek a second answer, therefore, we should first stop thinking of rural India in terms of 'peasant' and 'labourer'. It is not enough to modify this by identifying an 'upper section' of the rich peasantry, or magnanimously granting that there do exist landlords in benighted places like Bihar. We have to look at what is a very real class, which cannot be called 'peasant'—rich or superrich—by any stretch of one's imagination. This class cannot be specified exclusively in terms of landlords, though it has emerged through a further development of the landlord class. To this day, a major part of its interests are in landholding but it straddles the rural and the non-monopoly urban economy.

This class finds itself starved of avenues and means of enrichment (not necessarily investment). One matter of concern for this class is profitable cultivation, without which it is deprived of resources, both in the form of its own surplus accumulation in its own fields, and in the form of rural 'household savings', which it handles through a variety of formal and informal, legal and illegal, financing arrangements. Its other concern is with the resources supervised by the state, which are perceived as being employed lopsidedly for the benefit of monopoly capital, both because of the closeness of dominant sections of the Congress party to the monopolists and because of the very nature of our economic structure.

The natural constituency of this class is the village. It can win its battle against monopoly capital and the state only if it can consolidate the village behind it. It is felicitous in the use of the peasant idiom, it is heir to the feudal tradition of a leader's role in the village, and some of the peasant concerns are of concern to it too. The better-off sections of the peasantry, therefore, fall in line, aided further by the fact that caste usually functions as a common link between the two classes, though there are also plenty of conflicts between them. But the real difficulty arises with the rural poor—the landless and poor peasants. Their concerns are different and distinct from those of the rural rich and often in conflict with them to boot. Caste acts as a further dividing factor. This is where the need for the ideology of village unity and the need to occasionally put down the rural poor brutally come in. The feudal subordination of the middle peasantry to the provincial rich, links of caste, and a partial commonality of economic interests, help in creating an army of foot soldiers from among the middle peasantry to put down the poor. *This is the essential meaning of the Karamchedus of contemporary India.* These are not conflicts among the people, but politically necessary assaults upon the rural poor in the course of the consolidation of the dominance of a major fraction of India's exploiting classes.

If this answer were to be accepted, how do we face the situation? How do we build the 'alliance of popular forces'? Do we build such an alliance at all and if so, why? These questions have no meaning, let alone any answers, outside a political framework. I have to state my framework, not because it is new, but because it probably answers to the description of the 'one-point programmes' which Omvedt and Gala are critical about. It is the traditional marxist framework of capture of state power by the working people in order to build socialism and transform society to achieve a state of communism. In India's context, 80 per cent of the revolutionary masses would be the rural poor and landless peasants. When we talk of alliances, we mean alliances for their revolution and alliances for them.

Enemy of the Masses

The class of the provincial rich is an enemy of the masses along with imperialism and big capital. And the rural poor, the core of the revolutionary masses, must be organised first and foremost against this class in the struggle for their liberation. All other struggles of the rural people—like, for instance, the middle peasantry's struggle for more equitable terms of trade—must be *structured strategically and tactically into this struggle.* It is only through the struggle against this class that the masses would be able to meet with and contend against big capital and imperialism in a *revolutionary* way. Any other way of organising the poor directly against big capital and imperialism would be either an infructuous attempt or, at best, a reformist programme. Putting it in plainer language—one cannot organise the rural poor directly around issues like drought, deforestation or exploitation by urban capital in a *revolutionary* way. These issues have to be built into a struggle that is structured around a fight against their immediate oppressors, the landlords in their present manifestation.

To my mind, this is one of the principal ideas taught by the CPI(ML) movement, and one of the many crucial points that distinguish it from the 'grassroots radical movements' that are being heralded a lot today. Whatever else of the Naxalbari heritage we may like to discard, this much cannot be discarded. The question still arises: how does one structure the middle peasantry's demands into this line, how does one form an alliance with it, and how does one prevent the middle peasants from acting as foot soldiers of the provincial rich? How the caste barrier can be breached is part of this question. If I may be allowed to coin an aphorism, caste cannot be fought by fighting caste. Nor can it be fought by the idealistic inculcation of secular values, which is—at best—the method tried by the two parliamentary communist parties. Caste—and I say this at the risk of sounding terribly old-fashioned—can only be fought through class struggles.

Rather than go on like an oracle, let me try to elaborate on the basis of the (admittedly very limited) experience of the CPI(ML) groups in Andhra Pradesh. I must add (since some people have described me as a spokesperson for the CPI(ML) groups) that these are my observations and I do not know whether the groups would agree with me. The groups have been functioning basically in two kinds of areas—plains and forests. In the plains, they have faced the problem of uniting the rural poor and the middle peasants, often transcending the barrier of caste. In the forests, where a sizeable number of non-tribal small peasants have settled down alongside the tribals, they have faced the problem of uniting the tribals and the non-tribal poor. Whatever success they have achieved has been obtained not by directly taking up middle class peasant issues like remunerative prices in parallel with landless labourers' issues, nor by fighting 'caste', but by: (i) building a widespread and militant movement among the poorest classes, demonstrating this strength in actual struggles with the rural rich and the state, and thus, *on the basis of their strength,* winning over the middle peasantry; and (ii) educating and organising the middle peasantry to take up the fight against the landlords, who oppress them through feudal social dominance and through the control over rural credit, marketing, and the political and economic structures of 'development'. The fight against big capital and the

state has been generally taken up as a further development of this fight against the rural rich. This, it seems to me, is the only revolutionary way of winning over the rural middle classes to an 'alliance of popular forces'. In view of the brutal repression unleashed on the CPI(ML) movement in Andhra Pradesh, and the intervention of caste carnages in Bihar, the feasibility of this line, except to a limited extent and in a limited area, is being questioned.

I have no readymade reply, except to reiterate that there is no other *revolutionary* way of handling the situation, though there probably are many other meaningful ways of reacting to it if one is willing to settle for something less than a revolution. And perhaps, instead of searching for admirable qualities of democratic organisation in middle class movements, we would be better spending our time if we sought the right tactics, and forms of struggle and of organisation for sustaining a militant movement of the rural poor until it attains the requisite strength for attracting the middle classes to itself, and for sustaining a struggle of the middle peasants against the provincial rich. Albeit, this is much more difficult than building anti-capital and anti-state middle peasant movements. The failure of the CPI(ML) movement is the failure to find the right answer to this question, and it has not been helped by the large-scale desertion of intellectuals, who ironically hailed it to the skies under fair weather.

Farmers' Movements

We can now conclude with the 'farmers' movements'. I would assume that we are talking of the movements of those peasants to whom the quotation from 'The Civil War in France', given by Omvedt and Gala, applies. The quotation has no relevance whatsoever to the provincial rich, but I would grant for the sake of debate that the Shetkari Sangathana represents such peasants.

The fact that these peasants have a genuine cause, and that it deserves the sympathy of all democrats, is beyond argument. But that is to say nothing about how one should be reacting to them politically. There is a middle peasant class, but there can be no middle peasant politics. What appears as middle peasant politics is an ephemeral phenomenon that has got to choose, sooner or later, between the rural rich and the poor. And as long as their outlook is that 'the main exploiters of the peasants are the urban capitalists and the state', the class is naturally compelled to choose the former. On the other hand, the middle peasantry that is exploited by the urban capitalists through unequal terms of trade is oppressed in many ways by the provincial elite, which dominates not only the village society

but also regional trade, marketing, credit and business. But the feudal hold that this class has over the middle peasantry renders it difficult to wage a struggle against it. A farmers' movement that obfuscates this reality by exclusively focusing on agricultural prices and costs is actually a movement that is ready for being co-opted into the elite's army. Such a farmers' movement is against the 'alliance of popular forces'. It is from this perspective that one is critical of the farmers' movements. Not everyone may agree with me, but it seems to me that the question, 'where is the "rich peasant" leadership and where is the "proletarian" leadership' is settled by analysis at this level, and not by forms of organisation or the attitude adopted towards women. Even there, if the Shetkari Sangathana has taken a stand in favour of equal property rights for women while the Rytu Coolie Sangham (RCS) has not, that is only a reflection of the nature of the classes they organise. For most members of the RCS, property rights are a largely irrelevant matter. They fight for land, but their fight has not yet attained the kind of success wherein they have to discuss as to who would inherit the land. Actually, wherever they have managed to wrench some land from a landlord or the government, they have been cultivating it through a cooperative effort.

The right question that one should have asked at Warangal would have been whether the RCS is fighting for equal wages for men and women for equal work. The answer is mixed. For work of the same type, they have fought for and got equal wages, but they have not been able to articulate and establish the principle that work of the same duration must get the same wage. Consequently, work that is done predominantly (but not exclusively) by women, like transplanting and weeding paddy fields, gets less wages than work that is normally done by men, and this deserves a legitimate critique.

Agrarian Revolution, Not Wage Increases

EPW, 10 September 1988

Gail Omvedt and Chetna Gala (2 July 1988)[1] agree that revolutionary strategy needs to be discussed, but they themselves refuse to do so. The 'class character of the rural poor' is that they have an objective interest in expropriating the rich, smashing the existing state and social structure, and building a new society based on collective labour and collective appropriation. This is precisely what is *not* the objective interest of the most vociferous sections of the movements for 'remunerative prices'; and that marks a genuinely marxist class division of the rural people. If the rural poor have to be described empirically, then one has to take various conditions into consideration. The class certainly includes all the agricultural labourers (comprising 25 to 30 per cent of the rural families); equally certainly it does *not* include the 'middle peasants', whose cultivation is characterised by a dependable irrigation and capital infrastructure, regardless of the marketing and pricing problems that they may have. The rest of the peasants with self-sufficient family holdings must be judged in terms of these characteristics to decide whether they can be included in the class of the rural poor or can be counted as neutral elements. This is not an economic division based on income but a *class* division based on the existence of an *irreconcilable* conflict with the system. The conflict is irreconcilable because the developments of the last forty years have shown that the system is incapable of meeting the needs of the rural poor, though it has done—and is expected to further do—a lot for the landlords and the better placed peasantry, and has the capacity to further co-opt a few more into the latter section.

[1] 'Peasant Question is a Class Question', *EPW*, 2 July 1988.

We are told that the entire peasantry has a fundamental interest in the overthrow of capital. Putting it thus, while saying that revolutionary strategy needs to be discussed, is to beg the question as to whether the 'overthrow of capital' is an adequate description of the revolution we seek. But is even this statement true? In the first place, to lump together two-thirds of the rural population, 'who make their living primarily through family labour on their own fields' as a 'middle peasantry' is misleading in the extreme. Some of them exploit substantial amounts of the labour of others and have a well-developed infrastructure for their cultivation, apart from the non-agricultural business and the other interests they have. They should properly be called 'rich' and not middle peasants. It can be said that all this does not constitute a class difference, but to ascertain what *does* constitute a class difference we only need to know the number of peasants who really have an objective interest in a revolutionary transformation of the existing relations between property and exploitation, or even just the overthrow of capital, and the number of them who have an objective interest in merely arriving at a better arrangement in terms of capital. The fact that the entire 'middle peasantry' wants remunerative prices is no more 'anti-capitalist' than the fact of workers asking for higher wages is 'anti-capitalist'. Workers become anti-capitalist by asking for an expropriation of capital. As a popular Hindi song, often cited in radical circles, puts it:

When we the working masses
claim our share
It will be neither a field nor a plot
but the whole world.

Do all the 'middle peasants' as defined by Gail Omvedt and Chetna Gala want 'the whole world' or only their share?

There is a certain amount of ingenuousness and a fair amount of duplicity in the tears that are copiously shed over the 'oppressed peasantry'. 'Primitive accumulation of capital' is no doubt going on all over the world and it does entail (among other things) an unequal exchange between agriculture and industry, but this does not mean the same thing today that it meant a hundred years ago. It no longer signifies a one-way traffic of buying agricultural products cheap, and selling cloth and bicycles dear. It is instead

a two-way traffic wherein capital supplies better inputs and technology to agriculture and exchanges the extra produced thereby against the inputs it has supplied, as well as consumer goods, both of which are overpriced, but not so much as to account for the entire extra lot produced. The landholders are *also* benefited roughly in proportion to their asset holdings, though they suffer the privations inherent to capital including anarchy of the markets, inappropriate and ecologically disastrous technology, and the importation of capital's accumulation crisis into agriculture, among other things. The better endowed among them take these crises in their stride and enrich themselves to unprecedented degrees, but the poorly endowed suffer. It makes no sense to lump all of them together. Here is a good illustration: about thirty cultivators of cotton committed suicide in Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh last year because of crop failure and consequent indebtedness. Some observers said that the crops failed because of the use of adulterated pesticides, while others claimed it was because of drought, and Sharad Joshi—with the admirable single-mindedness that virtually makes him the Datta Samant[2] of the peasantry—insisted during his visit that it was not crop failure but unremunerative prices that led to indebtedness.

Teams of journalists, ministers, officials, newspaper editors, film stars, and the top executives of Andhra Bank and Syndicate Bank visited the area, and clicked their tongues and shed copious tears. However, none of them thought of saying that the wealth generated by the very same tobacco and cotton cultivation in the canal-irrigated tracts of old Guntur district has produced, through further reproduction and multiplication in urban finance, contracts, business, real estate, cinemas and politics, some of the richest and most powerful people in the state. Nor did any of these luminaries—including Sharad Joshi—visit Anantapur and Mahbubnagar districts where doubtless more than thirty people have died more or less due to starvation during the last three years of drought. The politics of exclusive opposition to capital is a politics of commodity fetishism: if what the farmer produces is not a commodity beyond the local market—or he does not produce anything at all because his lands have dried up—then his death is not an issue. One has to be subsumed by capital to become a human being. Since everything is already declared to have been subsumed by capital, anything which has not been similarly subsumed does not exist. By a strange paradox, what does not interest capital does not interest its opponents either. And yet there are many people—and regions—that are

[2] Datta Samant (1933–97) was a trade union leader in the textile mills of Bombay and a Congress MP.

of only marginal interest to capital, including people who produce just enough for their subsistence, or a little paddy, sesamum, *jowar*, *bajra*, castor or groundnut for the local market. To say that they are also interested in remunerative prices because they also sell something or the other is tautological.

It is not the issue of remunerative prices but those of land, water and work that constitute the problems of the rural poor. The agricultural labourers, who comprise 25–30 per cent of the rural population, are either landless, or even if they have land, it is not sufficient to provide the whole family with work to do and food to eat. Apart from being small in size, their plots are usually poor in quality; and there is no visible sign of improvement. For them, work and land constitute the major problems. As for the self-sufficient middle peasantry, many of them—and almost all of them in many areas—do have enough land to keep the whole family occupied when cultivation is going on, but that is not frequently enough or fruitful enough to give them a decent livelihood. Irrigation—water—is their main problem. Barring the rich and middle peasants in the canal-irrigated areas (and in tank- or well-irrigated areas, those whose landholdings and infrastructure are of good quality and favourably located), for the rest of the rural working people, land, work and water constitute the main problems. Many of them may—and actually do—sell a part of their produce in the market and would certainly respond favourably to demands for 'remunerative prices', but that demand constitutes neither the beginning nor the end of their worries. In badly drought-hit Rayalaseema, for instance, 32 per cent of the sown area is under groundnut cultivation, and therefore, any movement for remunerative prices for that crop would, in theory, attract attention. But apart from the fact that no such movement has taken root, on talking to the cultivators, one finds that their principal wish is that the poorly utilised waters of the Godavari river should be diverted to the Krishna and the Tungabhadra rivers, and used to irrigate Rayalaseema, so that they can stop growing groundnut and instead grow something that they can eat. And once the water is assured, the landless, who do not show much enthusiasm for land struggles today, would demand a share of the huge landholdings that some of the reddy landlords possess.

Also, these rural poor do have an irreconcilable conflict with the system, the kind of irreconcilable conflict that the better-off peasants do not have even with capital, let alone with the system as a whole. The state has systematically sabotaged land reforms and has created a situation wherein bold people now tell us that land reform is a mythical dream of the urban radical class; regular and well-remunerated work is almost universally

unavailable for the poor in most parts of the country; the norm is that they work for less than half the number of days in the year and for less than the statutory minimum wage, not to speak of a decent wage; as regards water for irrigation, hardly 40 per cent of the irrigation potential of the country has been tapped, and the nature of property relations in the country does not permit efficient soil conservation and land management, thereby leading to a devastation of the potential itself. This situation, which precludes any sign of a possible improvement, is an essential consequence of the nature of the agrarian policy of the Indian state. It coexists with the enrichment of the well-endowed peasantry and of the landlords, through the medium of agrarian measures like electrification, irrigation, improved seeds, machines, fertilisers, pesticides, etc, supported infrastructurally by financing and marketing institutions. The wealth produced by these means is left untaxed and allowed—again with infrastructural and financial support from the state—to freely reproduce itself in contracts, politics, trade and the tertiary sector, in general. It is from this dimension of the state's agrarian policy that the main agitators for remunerative prices are emerging, and we are asked by marxists to recognise this as the voice of the Indian village!

However, it is necessary to go beyond the issue of remunerative prices and ask whether capital is a sufficient reference point for discussing revolutionary strategy. And this political question turns around a methodological question: is capital as a concept adequate for understanding the Indian society and state? Most people seem to think that it is. One starts with imperialist and Indian capital, its monopoly character, its appetite for extended reproduction and consequent crises, its markets, technology and finance. Then one follows up the consequences that all this has for various social classes, ignoring (naturally) those whose existence is inconsequential for capital. The trouble with this method is that it presupposes what it triumphantly discovers at the end, and most of its truths are tautologies, with the distinction between the two being obliterated by the unbridled use of mathematics, that most fetishistic of all subjects. Contrary to this method favoured by academics, communist parties have generally followed a different method, which entails identifying the principal social classes by the mode and extent of their property or the mode of their labour; and proceeding with the presumption that propertied classes would try to enrich themselves, and to preserve and protect their property and power by any historically and socially viable means, and that the working people would equally try to protect and improve their livelihood. The state is seen as an agency that helps the propertied classes to accumulate and protect their property; its fiscal policies, its development strategies, and its law and order machinery are merely seen as instruments serving this end. Those who adopt this method have an open mind as far as capital is concerned, and view the latter and its role for what it actually is. In a situation wherein capital does not merely gobble up whatever comes its way but has the voracity to transform the whole world 'in its image', the two methods may lead to the same conclusion, but in the late twentieth-century post-colonial world, where capital has no need to transform the world to make profits for itself, it is necessary to keep an open mind as far as capital is concerned.

A tempting illustration is presented in Carol Boyack Upadhya's article on the 'Farmer-Capitalists of Coastal Andhra', published in the 2 July and 9 July issues of this journal. It is no doubt unfair to pick on a researcher for the topic she chooses to research; and certainly, the desire to know what happens to the surplus generated by the canal-irrigated agriculture of coastal Andhra Pradesh is a legitimate exhibition of curiosity. And yet, considering the certainty that nobody is going to research the farmer-capitalists of, say, Nellore district, one is tempted to suspect that researchers often study only whatever the methodologies allow them to research. An existing theory says that capitalism in agriculture leads to the accumulation of capital, which can then be invested in urban business to make further profits, and which finally takes the form of industrial capital, with the whole process being typical of the 'development of capitalism'. But firstly, any uninitiated person living in coastal Andhra Pradesh would find it rather strange that the researcher goes all the way to Visakhapatnam to find out what is happening to the capital of coastal Andhra Pradesh, and would eventually realise that she does so only because she is burdened by the faith that just as any pious soul ultimately enters a brahmin's body, all capital must ultimately enter industry, and Visakhapatnam is the only place where any industry exists. If she were not so burdened, the uninitiated person would tell her that she could as well have gone to the Telangana districts, for instance, where some of the farmer-capitalists of coastal Andhra Pradesh have been reborn as liquor barons, complete with their armies of goondas, whose job is to murder and rape tribals, and preserve their master's liquor monopoly, though some of the goondas and a few of the masters themselves get killed in retaliation by naxalites in the process. And since the excise revenue of the state government equals the total expenditure on public administration, this is not a frivolous suggestion! Or the researcher could have gone to Madras to find the farmer-capitalists immersed in the production, finance and distribution of third-rate entertainers; or she could have found them in Vijayawada and the other towns of coastal Andhra

Pradesh, where they are involved in trade, real estate and much more shady affairs. And since the share of trade, hotels and restaurants in the state's net domestic product has been consistently higher than that of manufacture, this is not a frivolous suggestion either!

Secondly, this obsession with capital leaves us with no 'model' for studying the 'farmers-capitalists' of any other regions except a few like coastal Andhra Pradesh. In today's Andhra Pradesh, for instance, within the class of really rich and powerful businessmen, some of the reddys of Nellore district are providing a stiff though currently unsuccessful competition to the rich kammas of coastal Andhra Pradesh. They too were landholders once upon a time, but their lands have had little irrigation; the soil in the district is sandy where there is no gravel, and stony where there is neither sand nor gravel. There is little of interest for capital in the land and yet a section of the landholders of the district has grown into a strong group of multimillionaire businessmen that rival their contemporaries in coastal Andhra Pradesh. They have achieved this status almost exclusively on the basis of execution of public works contracts. It would probably be argued that public works such as roads are used by capital to transport goods and by peasants to transport goods to be exchanged against capital, but most of the roads are laid in summer and get washed away in the monsoons, while during the period between the summer and the monsoons, there is little time for capital to use them. Jokes apart, it would be particularly painful cantankerousness to argue that anything which is used by capital came into existence exclusively in the interests of capital.

This is not meant as an aside. Agrarian relations cannot be discussed without according central place to the Indian state's agrarian policy, and without recognising that the policy has never signified merely the subordination of agriculture to capital. While devising its policy, the state can be said to have had four interests in mind: (i) to protect, to the maximum extent possible, the prosperity and power of the class of landholders, who emerged as a dominant class in the villages after the abolition of the zamindari type of tenures; (ii) to provide various fresh avenues (depending upon the natural endowment of the respective regions) for their enrichment, through administrative, fiscal, political and developmental strategies, as also infrastructure for the transfer of their wealth to non-agricultural activities; (iii) to consolidate a broad support base in the villages for the state, and a broad market for capital, by co-opting a section of the peasantry through tenancy reforms, and infrastructural measures like provision of electricity, irrigation, rural banking, procurement, and subsidies for costly inputs; and (iv) to keep the rural poor quiet by making promises and offering welfare half-measures, and in case that were to fail, to put them down brutally.

All these cannot be captured by viewing 'the village' as an *object* for capital in India's development or underdevelopment. It is not only the landlords but also the substantial peasantry that have been a *subject* of the Indian state's policies. The latter has modernised agriculture—to whatever extent it has—not just to aid capital, but *also* to enrich the propertied classes of rural India. It has not introduced cooperative financing of agricultural activities merely to lubricate agrarian production in the interests of capital, but *also* to provide cheap access to public funds for the landholding classes as well as a new source of power for the landlords. Its marketing institutions, excise contracts, public works contracts, and panchayati raj structures cannot be understood merely in terms of the subordination of agriculture to capital, without taking into account the deliberate enrichment and entrenchment of the rural rich, and the co-option of a section of the peasantry into both the market and the polity as a support base. There was perhaps a time and a clime in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe when capital by itself could have achieved all these changes. Today it cannot. And, therefore, all the Third World states, even as they serve the interests of capital and allow and protect its expansion, also adopt all other historically and politically viable means to enrich and protect the propertied classes and suppress the poor. And that is why they cannot be fully comprehended by capital-obsessed methodologies, whose inadequacy is clearly evident when they assume the extreme form of centre–periphery dependency theories. Nor can they be overthrown by capital-obsessed strategies.

It is the whole structure emerging as a consequence of this development that needs to be overthrown by the poor. The rural poor must expropriate and take over the entire land of the rural rich, who today have one foot in agriculture and the other foot in politics or the tertiary sector. Further, there is need to impose a strict (subsistence) ceiling of a family holding on the better-off peasantry, divide the land among the landless, initiate co-operative/collective cultivation so that the available resources are conserved and centralised, and ensure that a major part of the surplus (which is today a tax-free gift to the rural rich, who mostly take it out of the village), barring only that used for the overall industrialisation and administration of the country, is employed in rural areas to develop irrigation, improve land management and soil conservation, and expand rural works and industries. This is the essence of the agrarian revolution, which the CPI(ML)

groups have, since the advent of Naxalbari, seen as the axis of the New Democratic Revolution. And with the agrarian revolution is integrated the struggle against capital, which has a symbiotic relation of mutual dependence with the agrarian structure.

Finally, there is no merit in taking extreme positions to prove a point. It would be perilously close to nonsense to say that the wages of agricultural labourers have never risen due to wage struggles but have risen only when the prosperity of the peasants has made a rise possible. In Andhra Pradesh, wherever anybody (mostly the communists, but also a few non-communist groups and voluntary agencies) has bothered to organise the labourers, there has been a steady and widespread increase in wages, even in areas that are not agriculturally prosperous. The same must be true of other states where the communists have been active. It is good to know that the Shetkari Sangathana is demanding higher wages for labourers than even radical organisations dare to. It is obviously the easiest for the wages of labourers to increase when those who pay them decide to increase them, and such employers must be reckoned as intelligent people, but what is the point sought to be proved here? Is there any historical or philosophical reason for believing that those who achieve high increases in wage have any interest in the revolution or, contrariwise, that those who cannot obtain increases in wage are incapable of fostering a revolution?

Rich Peasant, Poor Peasant

Seminar, December 1988

One of the major threats to the Indian state and the social structure supported by it has, in recent times, come almost exclusively from the villages. It is not that the urban working class is a 'labour aristocracy' and is, therefore, uninterested in or incapable of threatening the structure. A small section of the urban working class has deceptively high wages but a large majority of them lead lives that are often worse than those of the rural poor. But the urban working class is numerically so small that it has not yet succeeded in posing a very serious threat to the state. About the only time in recent years that the Indian state got a real shock from the urban worker was in 1974 when the railway workers went on a nationwide strike.

There are two types of pressures from rural India: one, the struggle of the poor peasants and landless labourers, and the other, the struggle of the relatively better-off peasants usually called 'middle peasants' or 'rich peasants'. The two movements differ not only in terms of the classes they fight. While the movements of the rural poor are designed to fight the rural rich—the landlords and the contractors, for instance—the movements of the 'middle' peasants are aimed at the urban rich and the imperialists. During the last decade or two, the former type of movements were very much in the news and it was intellectually fashionable to support them; now, however, the latter type of movements are rapidly occupying the same position. This signifies a sharp shift in focus and it is now widely held by

one-time radical intellectuals that the fervour of the 1970s was a gigantic illusion. The shift is semantically facilitated by the odd fact that intellectuals have supported both types of movements in the name of the same 'peasantry'. The word 'peasant', as used by our intellectuals, applies to whichever class one sympathises with among the rural population. It is difficult to arrive at a more precise definition on the basis of the intellectual practice of the Indian *buddhijeevi*.

However, it must be realised that there is a third and very strong pressure that works from rural India on the Indian state. This understanding is crucial for a complete comprehension of rural society as well as a proper appreciation of both types of agrarian struggles mentioned above. The lack of such an appreciation is reflected in the very limited terms in which those struggles are understood. The struggles of the rural poor are analysed in the same terms in which they would have been analysed fifty years ago—land distribution, wages, control of wastelands, bondage, tenancy, unpaid labour, etc, whereas agitations of the 'middle' peasants are, even more simplistically, analysed exclusively in terms of an unequal exchange between the primary and secondary sectors of the economy.

The pictures of rural India depicted in the two sets of analyses have nothing whatsoever in common. It is almost as if the rural poor and the 'middle' peasants live in different villages altogether. It is no wonder then that people who are worried about conceptual and analytical coherence have begun to suspect that one of these two must be imaginary, and since the 'middle' peasant world of inflated input costs and unremunerative sale prices appears real—what with the Sharad Joshis and the Tikaits[1] capturing the headlines every second day—it is assumed that the other world, that of the rural poor, must be illusory.

In order to maintain our sanity, it is necessary to obtain a total picture containing both these movements within a meaningful and internally related whole. The picture is best understood against the backdrop of the wide variety of social disturbances regularly occurring in rural India, namely, the struggles of the rural poor for land, and wages, and against social oppression; the struggles of the landed peasants for remunerative prices, cheap inputs and infrastructural facilities; booth capturing, physical assaults and other forms of physical violence at the time of panchayat, assembly or parliament elections; conflicts and power struggles relating to rural cooperatives and government contracts; organised assaults on the rural poor including atrocities on dalits and other forms of community-based oppression; and so on. It is significant that among all these disturbances, only the first two earn the attention of analysts, and are held to be sufficient in themselves for understanding rural society and politics.

[1] Mahendra Singh Tikait (1935–2011) was a leader of farmers in western Uttar Pradesh and was president of the the Bharatiya Kisan Union.

False Dichotomies

This is particularly true of those analysts who are partial to 'middle' peasant agitations, and who conceptualise village society in terms of just two classes, that is, labourers and peasants, and analyse the dynamics in terms of the suicidal/treacherous agitations of the labourers against the peasants, and the peasants against the urban capitalists and imperialists. This 'model' would find it impossible to explain much of what goes on in rural India; to take just one instance, the fact that in Andhra Pradesh nearly sixty to seventy murders have taken place in rural and small-town areas during the last year and a half against the background of a series of elections—elections to panchayat mandals, agricultural cooperatives, municipalities and *gram* panchayats. In these murders and counter-murders perpetrated by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Congress(I) gangs, it was ultimately 'peasants' of some type or the other who killed and got killed on both sides. This necessitates an analysis to explain these killings, as well as the struggles of labourers/peasants/farmers, whatever one wants to call them, and the murderous attacks on the rural poor, regardless of whether they take place on community or class lines.

Methodologically, the total picture has not been analysed because rural society is often studied principally on the basis of a single analytical category, that is, the degree of commoditisation of the economy. This focus leaves out many aspects that are essential for understanding the situation in its totality, for which purpose we need to focus on not just the degree of commoditisation of the economy but also the structure of rural society as it has evolved since 1947. The 'ideological' reason behind this methodological failure is the perception that the Indian state is exclusively an agent of capital, intent on creating a market for goods produced by it, and on developing agriculture for the purpose of providing raw material for its consumption and food for its workers' consumption. This understanding, which finds expression in the tendency of economists of the left as well as the right to concentrate on matters like the rate of capital formation, has severely distorted our understanding of the role of the state.

The efforts of the Indian state to consciously consolidate and enrich the class of rural rich, in the interests of not only capital but also the rural rich themselves, have failed because of the self-imposed preoccupation of the

economists. Since it is assumed that what characterises the Indian state definitely is its interest—or lack of it—in 'developing' India, and since development means rapid capital formation and industrial growth, which require a certain pattern of trade and a certain transfer of resources between industry and agriculture, this preoccupation is but natural. If we give up this 'problematic' of economic development and objectively assess what has happened to the rural social structure during the last four decades, we are likely to see a more complete picture. The period of the nationalist movement was also a period of frequent and violent anti-feudal struggles of various sections of the peasantry. Although these struggles were only selectively integrated into the Congress-led nationalist movement, the Congress party had no option but to take note of them while devising its policies for post-independence India. Yet that party had so many leaders at the national and provincial levels who themselves belonged to the class of rural rich or were politically and communally allied to that class that it had to perforce proceed slowly and cautiously. Therefore, immediate action was taken only against the zamindar type of people holding superior revenue rights, and that too only against their revenue rights, for which they were also paid compensation; their landholdings and the wide-ranging feudal authority that the class possessed were not immediately touched. Nor did the state touch the landholdings and feudal authority of the smaller class of landlords—mostly resident landlords whose claim to agrarian surplus was based partly but not principally on revenue rights and mainly on landholding and social authority.

However, as this small measure did not and could not satisfy the peasantry, further land reforms in the form of tenancy and land ceiling legislation were enacted and there was a lot of rhetoric against feudal oppression. This was a much more difficult matter since this class was the mainstay of the Congress party in most parts of the country. That is why the legislation was not implemented and the rhetoric was not given any more importance than was necessitated by the agitational strength of the peasantry, which varied from region to region. Today, more than three decades after these enactments, the 'game' of enactment–evasion–pressure–concession has reached a seemingly stable equilibrium.

The statistics of the government, which it has been gleefully frank in offering, aver that about one per cent of the total land available for cultivation has been taken over as surplus under land ceiling laws. Miserable as it is, this figure is still misleading since the land that has been taken over is mostly unsuitable for cultivation. The landlords disposed of all the cultivable surplus land through timely sales and subdivision—some of it

benami and nominal but some of it real—or by selling it to their own tenants or farm-servants, thereby creating a permanent constituency for themselves in the days to come. The bigger tenants used tenancy reforms to liberate themselves and join the class of dominant landholders. As regards the smaller tenants, in most parts of the country they got evicted and converted into unrecorded tenants/farm-servants/wage labourers; though in some places, depending principally on political factors, they managed to use the reforms to become independent cultivators. In the process, there has been a gradual consolidation of a class of dominant landholders in villages, ranging from old-style landlords holding 100 acres or more to their modern progeny or ex-tenants holding smaller but usually technologically modernised and highly productive holdings.

However, this landholding pattern does not explain everything that one needs to know for understanding rural India. This is another point wherein the accepted methodologies for analysing rural society are insufficient for our purpose. It is also necessary to examine the role played by the state in consolidating and enriching this class, or at least the upper section of this class. As mentioned above, the gamut of 'developmental' activities undertaken by the Indian state cannot and should not be understood exclusively as being aimed at creating a pattern of production, exchange and resource mobilisation that is needed for urban-oriented capitalist industrialisation.

The technological and infrastructural modernisation of rural India has entailed various measures including electrification, provision of artificial irrigation, chemical inputs and machinery, the setting up of agricultural and other rural cooperatives and marketing institutions, extensive development of rural banking in recent years, the penchant for getting most rural works implemented through contractors instead of getting them done departmentally, the ruralisation of politics through the panchayat institutions and their linkages with rural developmental works, and the provision of extensive infrastructural facilities for the transfer of rural wealth to urban areas to facilitate its investment in real estate, finance, trade, transport, contracts, business, the agro-processing industry and the marketable professions like medicine and law. All these measures must be taken into account fully and seen as being aimed at the consolidation of a class of rural–small-town rich, the class that has substituted the landlords of yesteryears without any rupture or discontinuity.

Taken as a class, it is still land based to a significant extent and generally village based. It exercises social domination over the villages through pre-capitalist institutions like caste and through the tradition of domination that it has inherited from its forefathers, both of which are neatly integrated

with 'modern' institutions like the gram panchayats and cooperatives. In the more 'backward' areas, even more primitive pre-capitalist institutions like *begar*, feudal monopoly of political and social opinion, and arbitration, and the maintenance of armed gangs for enforcing this monopoly, are extensively prevalent. Sometimes many of these institutions reappear after a period of apparent demise, say, in times of drought or political turmoil.

This class, which the Indian state has nurtured as assiduously as it has helped in the accumulation of urban capitalists and imperialists, is completely ignored in the dominant analyses of rural society. This is perhaps because the prevalent methodologies are incapable of capturing its existence, and the prevalent conceptualisation of social transformation has no place to accommodate it.

CPI(ML) and the Rural Poor

Nevertheless, this class is a key reference point for most of the social disturbances that affect the lives of a large majority of the people of India. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) movement, which perceives the agrarian revolution as the axis of the new democratic revolution, has fought this class as the immediate enemy of the rural masses; some of the groups even regard it as the principal enemy. Various kinds of oppressors including landlords holding large and prosperous estates of land, those controlling access to common wastelands and those exercising feudal social domination, corrupt and authoritarian headmen and heads of institutions like gram panchayats, cooperatives and marketing societies, and oppressive and extortionist contractors, and the political representatives of these oppressors constitute the class against which the CPI(ML) groups have organised the rural poor. Their agrarian programme has been based on the expropriation of this class and the distribution of its assets among the rural poor. The issues around which the masses are organised include agricultural wage rates and other matters, which seemingly pit the landless poor against the 'middle peasants', but to view it as a labourer vs peasant conflict is to view a political struggle economistically.

The enemies of the movement have themselves never had any doubts about its political content even when its main demands have been higher wages for transplanting or harvesting paddy. The rural rich—as distinct from the 'middle peasants'—can very well afford to pay the wages demanded, but they have reacted with the correct political instinct and opposed the CPI(ML) movement viciously. Where the 'middle peasantry' or a section of it has turned against the CPI(ML) movement, it is easy to discern that behind this opposition invariably lies the hand of a landlord, a contractor, a domineering gangster of feudal descent, a corrupt political boss, or some such force. As the economic and political strength of this class increases, the viciousness of these attacks also increases. In recent years, especially after the TDP came to power, the ruthlessness of the repression on the CPI(ML) movement has increased manifold, and its class content is clearly revealed in the exchanges in the state's legislative assembly, which is populated by the cream of absentee landlords, contractors, financiers, businessmen and brokers.

Suppression of the rural poor is an important requirement for strengthening the hegemony of this class. It is not just that payment of higher wages to the rural poor would affect the accumulations of this class, or that the demands for land redistribution would affect its property; this is, in effect, a political requirement too. When this class challenges the monopoly bourgeoisie and the imperialists in its desire for ensuring greater benefits for itself, it needs the full and solid support of the 'village'. This is well reflected in the phenomenon usually described as 'atrocities on harijans'. In recent times, Andhra Pradesh has witnessed an escalation of such atrocities, especially after the TDP came to power.

Contrary to the commonly accepted academic opinion that it is the 'Green Revolution' which is causing the tensions in villages, these atrocities have taken place in all kinds of villages. It is, in fact, a consequence of the academic's unhappy methodological obsession with capital that the Green Revolution has been isolated from all fiscal, political, administrative and other measures undertaken by the Indian state to enrich the rural rich. Further, these measures have had an impact even in the 'backward' areas. Where sufficient irrigation is available for their lands, the rural rich have been enriched through technological modernisation; in other areas, they have found a substitute in government contracts, cooperatives, and the large variety of administrative and 'developmental' institutions that have been created since Independence.

Major incidents of killing of dalits have taken place in Karamchedu (Prakasam district), Neerukonda (Guntur district), Dontali (Nellore district), Gudiada (Vizianagaram district), and four or five villages in Chittoor district. Karamchedu is a model 'developed' village in the canal-irrigated part of the old Guntur district. Paddy, cotton and tobacco are cultivated both extensively and intensively here, and the wealth generated by this cultivation has reproduced itself in the form of trade, real estate, business, cinemas, and lately politics. Neerukonda lies in the unirrigated upland region

of interior Guntur district, which has been a centre of commercial cultivation ever since the first *ryotwari* settlement in 1865–66, and especially of tobacco cultivation under the aegis of the ILTD[2] in later years.

Dontali in Nellore district and Gudiada in Vizianagaram district are situated in symmetric opposition to each other, outside the reach of the Krishna basin in the south and the Godavari basin in the north; they are archetypal backward villages located in drought-hit regions, whose dried-up tanks have rendered paddy more a memory than a foodgrain. Finally, Bandlapalli and other villages in Chittoor district lie in a region that has been agriculturally prosperous in a traditional sense ever since the days of the Vijayanagar empire. The region receives good rainfall from the northeast monsoon, which drains the Eastern Ghat hills and fills the irrigation tanks and keeps them full all the year round. Paddy, sugarcane and groundnut are grown in plenty here, and the prosperity is symbolised by the temple of Lord Venkateswarà built by the Vijayanagar kings in the midst of thick forests on the Eastern Ghat hills.

In all these villages, dalits or the other toiling caste people have been killed and their houses set on fire during the last two years. The assailants are mostly ordinary peasants but they have invariably been backed, even instigated, by the class of provincial rich discussed above. The individuals whom the dalits have accused of indulging in behind-the-scenes complicity, and whom the assailants claim as their patrons, include ministers, MLAs, absentee landholders involved in trade and business in nearby towns, and resident landlords who also indulge in trade and execution of contracts. Caste, of course, works as a cementing factor, but there are many other less visible binding threads. The instigators do not have any insurmountable economic conflict with the dalits, but they need to suppress the dalits to consolidate the support of the rural constituency in the struggle with the classes, namely, the urban capitalists and imperialists, with whom they *do* have serious conflict over the control and use of the nation's resources. And for ensuring this suppression, they instigate the ordinary peasantry against the labourers by playing upon the insecurity of the former as regards the prevalent agricultural conditions.

Rural electoral violence is another indicator of the nature and the inner contradictions of this class. The culture of gang fights of the feudal lords is now being carried forward by this seemingly much more modern class. Large parts of Andhra Pradesh, such as the Rayalaseema districts, are vertically split into factions that are locally dominated by individuals of the landlord–contractor–quarry owner class, owing allegiance to two or three big figures at the district level, usually the present ministers of the TDP government or past ministers of the Congress governments. And yet, as far as their economic activity goes, these overlords are as modern as anybody else, complete with Maruti cars and VCRs [video cassette recorders] at home.

During the last year and a half, factional violence during elections to panchayat bodies, cooperatives and municipalities has claimed sixty to seventy lives apart from resulting in the burning and destruction of hundreds of haystacks and houses. The district of Kurnool in Rayalaseema witnessed the remarkable spectacle of 300 villages, comprising about 25 per cent of the total number of villages, returning their sarpanches unopposed, a feat for which the villages received handsome grants in the form of cash from the state government in recognition of the purported maturity that made them elect their sarpanches by consensus and not wasteful conflict! In reality, however, the successful candidates managed to get elected unanimously only because they were sponsored by the factions whose writ runs unquestioned in the respective villages, and anyone who dares to question it has to risk the pain of considerable physical violence. This writ extends far beyond electoral choices and decides almost everything in the villages.

Monetisation, Not Commoditisation

It is within the matrix of the enrichment and domination of this class that one should make sense of rural struggles—struggles of both the poor as well as the 'middle' peasants. The market orientation of the rural economy is better described as monetisation rather than commoditisation, much less capitalist cultivation. The general monetisation of the economy forces cultivators to produce marketable crops even when that is not altogether the optimal choice for them. It forces subsistence production into the market without destroying its subsistence character. In the severely drought-hit Anantapur district, for instance, peasants who had a choice of cultivating wetland crops like ragi and paddy, and dryland crops like jowar, bajra and groundnut, are today growing groundnut almost as an exclusive crop. The unending drought has forced them into dryland farming all over again, and since their credit with the cooperatives has dried up due to repeated defaults and no moneylender is going to lend money for the cultivation of a non-marketable crop like jowar or bajra, they are left with groundnut cultivation as the only alternative.

This may very well show up in statistical tables as a spurt in commercial

[2] Indian Leaf Tobacco Development, which is the leaf tobacco division of the Indian Tobacco Corporation (ITC).

cultivation in Anantapur district. Indeed, there is a general tendency on the part of even small peasants to grow cash crops on dry land, not because they are profit-maximising capitalist cultivators but because the choice of any other crop would leave them starved for credit at one end and cash at the other. For instance, most of the lambada (banjara) cultivators in Warangal and Karimnagar districts grow groundnut on their small patches of red-soiled holdings (*kushki* land), and most of the gonds of Adilabad grow cotton in their (often illegal) black-soil holdings in the forest highlands.

Thus, the issue of remunerative prices for cash crops is a general problem of concern for the peasantry at large and not just for the rich peasantry. It will perhaps become a bigger problem as conditions of drought increase in terms of both extent and intensity. The argument offered by some people that the terms of trade are generally in favour of agriculture as against industry is not very convincing. In any case, the debate is vitiated by the misapprehension that the terms of trade determine the level of prosperity for all classes in villages. However, on the contrary, the prosperity of the rural rich would be affected much more by a decline in government expenditure on rural works, on the maintenance and running of rural institutions, and a shift in the policy concerning rural contracts, transport and marketing. Yet the rural rich do have a serious stake in the question of 'remunerative prices'. Partly, of course, this is because they themselves have land and often grow lucrative crops; partly, it is because low pricing for marketed output affects the savings of the peasantry and thereby the accumulation of wealth by the rich since they control and handle their savings through various formal and informal mechanisms; but more than anything else, it is because the cause of 'remunerative prices' is the cause of the entire 'village', and they are and must be seen to be the natural leaders of the village.

There is no other way whereby they can legitimise their claims for a greater share of state-controlled resources, a claim that they frequently assert against urban capital. 'Middle' peasant movements, which talk of village versus town, or the unorganised sector versus the organised sector, play into the hands of this class, whether they like it or not. Although this may seem like an unkind truth, it becomes starkly evident the moment the rural rich themselves step in to organise the 'peasantry', thereby revealing the crux of the matter. And here, as in all matters concerning the politics of the rural rich, N.T. Rama Rao's Andhra Pradesh is already taking the lead.

Recently, the state government has constituted a body called the Karshaka Parishad, which is funded by the government and is supposed to look after the interests of the farmers. Its members are enrolled at the village level while its office-bearers are elected. Its president is, of course, the chief minister's younger son-in-law, Chandrababu Naidu, who was born in a poor peasant family but owns more than a hundred acres of land and palatial houses in Hyderabad. The Karshaka Parishad, of course, talks the language of 'Bharat' and indeed a delegation of its members is reported to have gone to the different states to study the farmers' movements active in those states.

It is necessary to realise the potential, if not the present, domination of all the farmers' movements by the same class. This is not a matter of the subjective honesty and gandhian simplicity of the leaders, whether real or put on. The inherent danger of class domination of the movements will persist as long as the matter is analysed in terms of the conflict between capital and peasant production, between organised industry and unorganised primary production, and between capital-intensive production and labour-intensive production. The only way in which the farmers' movements can avoid co-option by the rural rich is to recognise class as an oppressor on par with urban capital.

Very few peasants need to be told this since they suffer the oppression, exploitation and swindling perpetrated on them by this class in their day-to-day life, but it needs to be recognised conceptually and integrated into a political line of struggle. It is much more difficult to fight this class than to indulge in rhetoric—or even in 'rasta roko agitations'—against urban capital, but there is no other way in which one can organise a genuine peasant struggle for better farm prices. Herein, it also becomes possible to unite the struggles of the landless for wages and land, and against the social oppression of the rural rich, with the struggles for better prices for agricultural produce. This is because the oppression of the rural rich is a fact of life for the mass of the peasantry as much as for the poor. In any real village, it is truly impossible to separate the problems of the ordinary peasantry from those of the rural poor. Indeed, it takes a shoddy methodology and political sleight of hand to achieve that miracle!

Rise of Gangsterism in Politics

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One does not go to a convention against fascism for obtaining a definitive analysis of fascism. One instead goes there to find out what fascism means and does to people of different modes of existence, and how—and how effectively—they are resisting it. Linking up these different pictures can help provide an integrated view of the emerging fascist trends, which is about as much as one can scientifically hope to have right now, for in a situation wherein the resistance to fascism is way behind the evil, any claim to more than a working theory of it would be epistemologically suspect.

The anti-fascist convention held at Trichur in Kerala on 14 and 15 January, which was attended by delegates from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal, served this purpose rather well, given all the limitations inherent in our cultural and political history and geography. To speak only of the geography, Kerala, which ranks high in the export of working people to other states and countries, is poorly served by the communication infrastructure of the Indian Railways as one has to traverse through a lot of irrelevant territory to reach the state. To give a striking illustration, the journey from Warangal to Trivandrum takes as much time as that from New Delhi to Warangal! The Indian capital—for all its pretensions to entrepreneurship and protestations of suppression at the hands of socialist ideology—has no use for this munificently offered labour power, which, therefore, ends up

supplying and washing dishes in tea shops. And since the petty commodity service sector is not influential enough to have a say in the capital expenditure of the government of India, it will always remain difficult and tiresome to get in or out of Kerala, though hundreds and thousands of people keep doing so every day.

Latest Mass God

As if this limitation of political geography were not enough, in this season, the journey is made even more tiresome by the rush of black-clothed and ritually unkempt-looking pilgrims going to Sabarimalai, the resort of Ayyappa, the latest mass god of Hinduism, who nevertheless shares with the earliest Hindu god the attribute of a dubious parentage. The myth of his parentage is typical of Siva–Vishnu syncretism, which, however, cannot explain the sudden popularity of the god in late twentieth-century South India, where neither Saivism nor Vaishnavism is of any sociological consequence, though cults of both the sects abound. The reasons are more modern, and both the reasons for the popularity and the changes that the cult has undergone in recent years are relevant to our concern with fascism. The cult—at least in Andhra Pradesh—first attracted exclusively male maverick elements of the urban lower middle classes/backward communities. No ritual was needed to join the cult except the donning of black clothes, and beads around the neck, as also keeping unkempt beards and bare feet. Individually, most of the converts were the 'problem type', that is, the type who have and give problems wherever they are. On being questioned, they would say that they have found solace and that the problems are being sorted out on their own—though there are no reported miracles—after taking the *deeksha,* which entails wearing the above-mentioned apparel and the shunning of drink and sex, culminating in a final visit to Sabarimalai around 'Makarasankramanam' time. But solace—as a psychological consequence of faith—explains nothing, as they need not have turned to a new god for that: they could have had their pick of a variety of established and organised cults. Temples to brahminised deities—Rama, Siva and Vishnu in the form of *amsa*s like Venkateswara—abound all over the state, and so do the cults of the more 'popular' Anjaneya and the preponderantly autochthonous mother-goddesses. The cults range all the way not only along the brahminical–autochthonous spectrum, but also along the private–mass spectrum. While discourses on upanishadic introspection can be heard in some temple or the other on any day, at the other end, the mother-goddess cults are wild enough to appeal to those sociologists who find it possible to describe the collective masses as mobs and herds. Thus the

reason for the spread of the Ayyappa cult goes beyond personal psychological needs.

The lower middle class of the overwhelmingly tertiary sector economy of urban India is a substantial and growing class: in all the states, it is the tertiary sector whose share in the regional product is increasing. But given the essentially perverse and even stunted nature of this development, the class, for all its growth, is unsure and insecure. It carries within it a strong sense of alienation, oppression and frustration. This oppression is not a private feeling that could find relief in familiar cults, but a *class* phenomenon, as it suffers oppression *by* the system and alienation *from* the system. The frustration must, therefore, necessarily find its outlet in something outside the establishment, preferably even anti-establishment, at least in its symbols and its idiom. The art forms that members of the lower middle class patronise, the magazines they read, the street gangs they join, the mafias they support, and the cults they are attracted to are all found at the fringe of or outside the establishment.

Appropriation of Cults

Yet, it is possible to be 'outside' the establishment only in a metaphorical sense, in the sense of being outside the normative standards proclaimed by the establishment; in a real sense, it is no more possible to be outside the system than it is possible to live outside the universe. There is no space outside a totality; that is an ontological maxim. You may resist its norms, you may even resist its philosophical idiom, or you may only resist its control, but there is no running away from it. Even if individuals sometimes cheat themselves into believing the contrary, the establishment knows this very well. What it does to various phenomena—the gangs, the media, the cults and the movements—that are 'outside' the establishment is to suppress them/profit from them/co-opt them. The first becomes necessary only in the case of self-consciously anti-establishment phenomena; for vague and undirected frustrations the second and the third are more sensible reactions. It is a historical characteristic of the Indian state and society that it is eminently adept at such sensible stratagems, an ability that is extremely relevant when we are discussing fascism. The Ayyappa cult first attracted (in Andhra Pradesh, at any rate) the frustrated elements among the lower middle classes, because—even though it borrows some myths and symbols from brahminism—it is recognisably outside the brahminical cultural establishment, which, in turn, is itself an integral element of the Indian state's ideological establishment. It is for this reason that the cult quickly gets integrated into the very system personified by the Indian state and society.

From being the eccentricity of maverick problem youth, it first becomes the religion of the whole family, and then an acceptable religion for a whole class. Women too take to this hitherto all-male cult, and the elderly parents, who earlier grumbled about the train fare to Kottayam, now put on black clothes and go along with the youth. The middle and upper middle classes also pick up the cult, as a result of which the black robes begin to lose their dirty look and acquire a black or deep blue sheen. Simultaneously, the brahmins devise a new ritual for the Sabarimalai trip. Hitherto, it was merely a question of buying a ticket and getting into the train; now the wife and husband have to submit to an elaborate farewell ritual complete with the brahmins chanting seemingly vedic mantras with supplications to the latest god having been miraculously woven into them. In a couple of years, the cult would either die out of sheer boredom among its followers or would become as acceptable as that of the Lord of the Seven Hills,[1] and the social misfits of the urban mohallas would have to seek a new god and a new cult.

Either of the above outcomes would be peaceful, but in a different situation and a different context, a not altogether peaceful assimilation could be imagined. Given, say, a preponderance of Muslims or Sikhs and the kind of volatile conditions created by the Ayodhya controversy or the murder of Indira Gandhi, it is easy to imagine the arming of the Ayyappa devotees—it must be remembered that each one of them is an amsa of the lord—with the *trishul* and the *chakra* of the lord's syncretic parents, and of course, more serviceable weapons for practical use, and their setting out to save the very same Hindu dharma, which would not allow most of these devotees even a decent rebirth in the normal course of things.

Hoodlums, Legislators, Martyrs

However, the utility of lower middle class misfits to fascism does not end with the appropriation of their cults for communal purposes. Each one of the modes of expression of the frustration can be appropriated and put to use. The establishment press can itself turn yellow—a hesitant shade at first and a deeper tint as soon as its confidence grows. The establishment art and literature can itself turn lumpen and violate all the canons of artistic values, social responsibility and personal morality proclaimed by the establishment itself. Finally, the street gangs can be appropriated and adorned with the hallowed symbols of parliamentary democracy: hoodlums become legislators, their gang fights become political battles, their murder

[1] Venkateswara/Balaji of Tirupati.

becomes national news, and in their death, they become martyrs in the cause of socialism, national integrity or Telugu pride. This dimension of the problem of fascism, which was lightly touched upon by the speakers at the Trichur convention, is well illustrated by the recent events in Andhra Pradesh.

Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga Rao (Ranga, for short) begins his life in a communist taxi-drivers' union; there is a rumour that at one point, he was even inspired by the call of Naxalbari. But soon he turns into a hoodlum under the leadership of his elder brother, the late Radha (whose full name was Radhakrishna). The gang soon splits into two, with one under the leadership of the Vangaveeti brothers, and the other under the leadership of the Devineni brothers, Gandhi and Nehru[2] (as their aspirational parents named them)—Gandhi was murdered some years ago and Nehru is now in jail on charge of having got Ranga murdered. The influx into Vijayawada of agrarian wealth and the profits from agro-based processing and trade, which find no better outlet than real estate and finance, offers a fecund basis for such hoodlums. The murky underworld of shady real estate and finance deals is second only to bootlegging and smuggling as a base for the operation of mafias.

This much is nothing unusual, and not of much significance in a discussion on fascism. But soon the crisis in the politics of the ruling classes intervenes. A precondition for the viability of bourgeois democratic forms of governance is that the ruling classes should be able to settle their problems amicably, and that they should be able to convince the masses to submit to oppression with good humour. When either of them—or both, as in India now—breaks down, fascist forms of governance take over. Street gangs then acquire political significance. Since the emergence of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) signifies the breakdown of amity among the ruling classes, the hoodlums of Vijayawada have become political leaders. Ranga thus became a Congress(I) MLA and Nehru a TDP MLA. Their mutual killings thereafter have become serious affairs. When Murali, a younger brother of the Devineni faction, was axed to death—along with four followers of the faction—at the time of the elections to the cooperative societies last year, the TDP went on a rampage (though a minor one as compared to what the Congress did this time) on the streets of Vijayawada. Ranga was accused of having planned the murder, and spent some weeks in jail. While in jail, he realised that it could well be his turn next (a fact which none of his ostentatious mourners would like to admit today), and realised further that being a Congress(I) legislator does not entail enough security. None of

[2] Devineni Nehru is, as of 2011, a Congress leader from Krishna district.

the Andhra Pradesh Congress leaders, who are now making capital of his dubious martyrdom, had ever entertained any feelings for him other than of distrust and aversion. They themselves lacked anything resembling a mass base, and they distrusted this hoodlum's image as a rebel. He could incite slum-dwellers to grab urban land, he could instigate rickshaw-pullers against the traffic police, and he could protect the lumpen proletariat from the corrupt policemen—things which a Vengal Rao[3] or a Rajasekhara Reddy, inhibited by their feudal past, or a Shiv Shankar,[4] inhibited by his past as a high court judge, could not do with equal aplomb. And so, while in jail, Ranga decided that he would have to enlarge his mass base further and impart greater legitimacy to it. He chose the kapu caste as his appropriate identity, for this caste—or rather castes as there are many castes which call themselves kapu in the generic sense—has a large presence among the peasantry and urban lower middle classes all over the state. The fact that there is a substantial kapu landowning and business elite in the Krishna delta and even more so in the Godavari delta, which would also find the mobilisation in the name of the kapus useful for furthering their own interests, only helped him. He convened assemblies of the kapus at many places in the Godavari and Krishna deltas. Each of these *kapunadus (nadu* is an old dravidian word denoting a territory as well as an assembly which is delimited territorially, or even communally, as in this case) was attended by thousands of people, and soon other kapu notables started identifying with it.

Despite taking these measures for self-preservation, however, Ranga was killed. The TDP's policemen hounded him and his gang until he felt really insecure, to the point of going on a hunger strike to demand that he be given protection. His prayer was not only ignored, but he was attacked while carrying on his protest and murdered in a most brutal and dastardly fashion. Irrespective of whoever may have actually perpetrated the crime, it is difficult to believe that the top TDP leaders did not have prior knowledge of it. The extraordinary amount of violence that followed his killing is itself proof that the act could not have been undertaken casually. The press described the violence as looting, plunder and caste conflict. But on closer observation, it was found to contain many strands. A marked element in the violence was the class hatred that the vulgar new rich of coastal Andhra Pradesh have brought in their wake, as it was their exhibitionist wealth that was the target of destruction. In the beginning, the rioters pointedly

[3] Chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, 1973–78.

[4] Former union cabinet minister. He also served terms as governor of Sikkim and Kerala.

destroyed the costliest and the most garish of the looted goods, and took home only the articles of common use. A second strand was the anti-kamma violence, to which both sides contributed equally—N.T. Rama Rao by visibly favouring the kamma caste in the distribution of spoils, and the Congressmen by whipping up caste hatred on this account. A third strand was the general eruption of popular frustration. And the last strand was the organised rioting engineered by Congressmen and Ranga's henchmen. It is said that in one street of Vijayawada alone, named after Annie Besant, property worth about Rs 100 crore was looted or destroyed. But then how many streets exist in the towns of this country wherein a few hours of rioting can destroy or despoil property and goods worth Rs 100 crore? It is meaningless to express moralistic horror only at those forms of plunder that are prohibited by the Indian Penal Code.

To get back to the theme of fascism, when hoodlums and their gang fights become an integral part of ruling class politics, for the people, the consequences go well beyond a few days' rioting. All the possible consequences need not be described, but there is one dimension that must be commented upon, which is the gradual demise of every single one of the institutions of bourgeois democracy. These institutions have never been particularly strong or democratic in our country, but whatever little vitality or democracy they ever had is being drained out concomitantly with the rise of gangsterism in politics. The law, the courts, the press and the administration, are all being subjected to this destruction.

This destruction attracted a lot of attention at the above-mentioned Trichur convention against fascism. Indeed, the figurative subtitle of the theme of the convention was the '59th Amendment to the Constitution', which restores to the Emergency provision its original attribute of being a lethal hatchet of formal democracy, an attribute that had been softened earlier under the pressure of the revulsion that the internal Emergency promulgated by Indira Gandhi had given rise to. However, a hatchet is not the best weapon for the use of judicious force, which is why there have been a number of other legislative enactments and amendments in recent times to curb the formal rights available to industrial workers, white-collar employees, press people, and of course, political activists. Indeed the decade of the 1980s has been punctuated by such enactments, including three amendments to the National Security Act, extension of the Suppression of Disturbances Act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to Punjab, the Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, the Trade Unions and Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Bill, the Hospitals and Other Institutions (Redressal of Grievances) Bill, the Defamation Bill, the Postal Bill, etc. It may be argued that such 'black laws' have never been required to suppress the people, and therefore, as a corollary, that an anti-fascist movement need not bother too much about such legal fictions: after all, it required no Act for the Suppression of Seditious Cultural Activities to murder Safdar Hashmi,[5] nor the enactment of the Defamation Bill to murder Umesh Dobhal or Pingali Dasaratharam.[6] But that is a superficial way of looking at things. One obvious reason for these enactments is that the rights which are formally taken away by them are not inconsequential paper statutes, but the fruits of hard-won victories. Secondly, the law is not merely a norm of social conduct supported by the sanction of the state apparatus, it is also an *ideology.* To be lawful is not merely to conform to the norms written down in the law codes; to be lawful is to be right, proper and morally *just.* If the norms delimit lawful behaviour, then the ideological connotations of lawful behaviour legitimise those norms, and raise them to a level of righteousness well above the positivist meaning attached to the word norm in the formal sense. When the policeman catches somebody else on the wrong side of the road, you do not merely feel relieved that it was not you who was caught, but you also feel righteous. It is this legitimacy that the state seeks when it enacts what we call 'black laws'. If Safdar Hashmi had been sentenced to life imprisonment under an Act for the Suppression of Seditious Cultural Activities (there is nothing fantastic about the notion: Section 4 of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act decrees a life sentence for anyone who merely propagates or predicts that a region of India is going to cede or secede), then not even one-tenth of these tears would have been shed for him, and that is what makes such enactments dangerous. That is why, even as we may like to campaign against death sentences as a matter of principle, it is necessary and right to keep reiterating that Kehar Singh's execution[7] was a terribly unfair act even under the existing rules and traditions of criminal trials. Even as our central task is to fight the real violation of fundamental rights, a critique of and a struggle against the formal violation of formal rights is also important. The rights have formal

[5] Safdar Hashmi (1954–89) was a communist playwright, actor, director, lyricist, and activist. He was brutally murdered in Delhi while performing a street play *Halla Bol!*

[6] Umesh Dobhal, a young Hindi journalist from Pauri Garhwal in present-day Uttarakhand, was murdered in 1988 and his body was never found. Dasaratharam was a young editor of the magazine *Encounter* published from Vijayawada. For a discussion of Dasaratharam's murder, see the piece 'Censorship by Force' in Section I of this volume.

[7] Kehar Singh was tried and executed in January 1989 for conspiracy in the plot to assassinate prime minister Indira Gandhi, which was carried out by his nephew Beant Singh and the latter's accomplice Satwant Singh.

recognition in the law only because they have real recognition in the hearts of the masses, and, therefore, to rule the masses without recognising their rights would be impossible. Equally, when it becomes necessary to violate the rights, it is preferable to enact the violation in the form of formal laws, so that the legitimacy consequently attached to the law *as such* would justify the violation in whatever manner possible.

A third dimension, which was discussed perhaps more extensively than the first two at the Trichur convention, is the political–social–economic background to developing fascism. There is no need to describe in detail all the problems that the ruling classes are facing, nor the fact that they are unable to find a satisfactory solution to any of these problems. What is relevant is that the solutions they are attempting—like 'liberalisation' of the economy, and patchwork accords for political crises—are inherently incompatible with the minimum respect for people's rights. Thus, each one of the hard-won rights of the people is being taken away both statutorily and by extralegal suppression. In the so-called 'high-wage island' big industry, not only is retrenchment taking place in the name of rationalisation, but there is also a growing tendency to contract out a substantial part of the work, as a result of which many big industrial units in both the public and private sectors undertake the manufacture of only the core of the product while getting everything else done on contract by private contracting units, which use low-paid labour, often that of women and children, for the purpose. The white-collar middle class thus faces a restricted employment situation in both the industrial and administrative spheres. If this is the situation faced by the most advanced sections of society, the condition of the others can only be imagined. Any resistance from the masses, therefore, needs to be suppressed brutally. The currently pending bills restricting the right of association and collective struggle of industrial workers and white-collar employees constitute only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath is hidden the monster of brute force, symbolised by the machine-gun-toting policeman, who is visible all over the country today.

The only hope lies in the resistance that the people have been expressing time and again, and their capacity for not only giving vent to uncontrolled outbursts but also holding disciplined and organised protests, the kind of discipline and dedication that shone through in the organisation of the Trichur convention. It would be foolhardy to believe that the resistance is strong enough to overcome the fascist onslaught, but it is only by courageously facing the onslaught that resistance can strengthen itself.

IV

Caste, Class and a New Populism

This Anti-Mandal Mania

EPW, 6 October 1990

There is perhaps no other issue on which we are such hypocrites as caste, nor any other which brings out all that is the worst in us with such shameful ease. The moment V.P. Singh[1] announces the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation of reservation for the Backward Classes (BCs), an avalanche of obscenity hits the country. It carries before it the press, the universities, and opinion-makers of all kinds.

Arun Shourie,[2] one-time civil liberties leader, starts writing sickeningly casteist articles and editorials. He temporarily shelves his habit of delivering self-righteous sermons to the reading public and tactical advice to the National Front[3] on its internal and external problems, and starts writing

[1] Vishwanath Pratap Singh (1931–2008). As prime minister from December 1989 to November 1990, he took the decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which fixed a quota for members of the BCs in jobs in the public sector to redress caste discrimination.

[2] A former economist with the World Bank, Shourie, then as editor of *Indian Express*, wrote a series of articles opposing the Mandal Commission recommendations. He later joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and became a proponent of hindutva. He was a minister in the BJP-led union government between 1998 and 2004. During the Emergency period, he was associated with the civil liberties movement, especially with the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

[3] A coalition of political parties, led by the Janata Dal, which formed the union government between 1989 and 1991.

the kind of insulting stuff against the dalits that would have got him lynched if he had dared to so much as hint against the Forward Castes. An acknowledged constitutional expert like H.M. Seervai[4] forgets for the moment the ideal of social egalitarianism that is one of the redeeming features of the Indian Constitution, and laments instead the death and destruction of merit and talent that egalitarianism has always been accused of leading to. Girilal Jain,[5] whose explicit advocacy of Rajiv Gandhi's cause was tempered with a seemingly gentlemanly style of writing, now comes out in rabid prose to demand the ouster of V.P. Singh's government on the ground that it has lost the sympathy of a handful of Forward Caste students in the North Indian capitals. Letter writers to the English language press, whose staid views and laboured prose have become bywords, suddenly turn poetic and start comparing the pranks of the anti-reservationists to the French student revolt of 1968 and the Chinese student uprising of 1989.

India Today, a newsmagazine, which normally affects an 'objective' and unemotional style of reporting, sheds all pretence of neutrality and openly comes out in full blast to bulldoze the views of its substantial readership in English, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu. It denounces the 'wretched display of cynicism' of the National Front constituents and supporters, and attacks the 'cynical waffling' of Rajiv Gandhi, *not* because all of them are covertly supporting the anti-reservation movement while defending reservation in public, but for precisely the opposite reason: that they are not denouncing the Mandal Commission's recommendations openly. It publishes one of the more offensive cartoons against reservation: the picture shows Singh and a bunch of Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and BC men and women happily lolling in a seaborne ship with three flags indicating the three categories hoisted on the deck, grinning cruelly at the Forward Caste students, who are sinking all around with their degree certificates held high. It is difficult to imagine a more atrocious caricature of reality, which is almost exactly the opposite, notwithstanding all the laments you hear about quotas.

The entire Forward Caste Hindu community has suddenly become a solid rock. Fundamentalist and secular, marxist and gandhian, urban and rural, have all been united as nothing else would ever have united them. They are led by the academics, the whole lot of whom—left, right and centre—have suddenly discovered that the only legitimate division of society is between the talented and the inefficient, and between the rich and the poor. People who would have normally called you a naxalite if you so much as spoke of class differences have made the sudden discovery that 'the only dichotomy in Indian society is that between the haves and the have-nots', as an unlikely statement of a Haryana BJP leader puts it. Caste will undoubtedly be the last of the iniquitous institutions to die out in this country. It will outlast everything else.

Everybody has suddenly made the unbelievable discovery that there is something called 'merit', which has been in the possession of the Indian elite all these days, and which is now sought to be destroyed by V.P. Singh to please the wretched, talentless Backward Castes and get their votes. A new term, and a new falsehood, have entered the ideological ballast of the Indian ruling classes. For four full decades, it is the Forward Caste Hindus who have dominated every aspect of life in the country. They have held all the land, all the capital in trade, finance and industry, they have held all the top positions in administration, education, science, technology and medicine, and what a pass they have brought the country to! The economy is running a fever of nearly double-digit inflation, coupled with sluggish growth and paucity of resources; its politics is ridden with crises of all kinds and is perverted by the ills of corruption; its agriculture is stagnant even in the Green Revolution showpiece areas; its administration is inefficient, unimaginative, and of course, corrupt. And it is these people who today claim that if others are allowed to get in, that would spell the death of development for India!

It is not very important whether the Mandal Commission's listing of BCs is very rational or scientific. That listing is undoubtedly the weakest part of an otherwise well-argued report. A rational debate concerning the identification of BCs can be held, and objective criteria evolved, if that is the only issue involved. After all, the South Indian states have been implementing reservation for BCs for more than two decades, on the basis of quite a reasonable classification. But the fact that this is not the issue at all is proved by the forms of agitation and slogans chosen by the Forward Castes. Just as a rational debate can and must be joined rationally, a casteist onslaught can only be fought in caste terms, and in the streets, if necessary. The Forward Caste youth are not only going around insulting and humiliating the BCs and SCs, but they also have the cheek to say that the government's decision has provoked caste war in the country. The youth

[4] Seervai (1906–96) is known for his work, *The Constitutional Law of India: A Critical Commentary* (1975). He was advocate general of Maharashtra from 1957 till his resignation in 1974. He declined various positions in the Indian judicial system preferring to contribute through a critical analysis of court judgements. The International Bar Association recognised him as a 'living legend of law' in 1994.

[5] A former editor of *Times of India*, Jain, at the time of the Mandal Commission report, was an advocate of the BJP's Ramjanmabhoomi movement.

are spoiling for a fight and their fathers are sitting at home writing articles, editorials and speeches, egging them on to fight to the finish.

It is difficult to forget Arun Shourie's initial editorials urging the Forward Caste youth to not allow the agitation to die out; and he is one editor who has consistently opposed all agitations, whether in his office or out in the streets. The pamphleteers against reservation, who are glorified by the names of editors of newspapers and professors in our universities, have the cheek to not only claim that it is reservation which provokes casteism, but also to add the patronising bit of advice that since employees who gain entry into offices and institutions on the basis of reservation are humiliated and insulted at the place of work, it is in the interest of their own self-respect to give up reservation. This argument is rather like a thief saying that he has the habit of pocketing other people's valuables when he is in the mood, and so they had better not possess any.

The association of Class I officers of the government of India urges the government to withdraw not only the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendations but also the existing reservation for SCs and STs, on the ground that such political expediency would have a deleterious effect on the efficiency of administration. As of now, 94.32 per cent of the Class I officers of the government of India are Forward Caste Hindus (plus a few elite Muslims and Christians), and what exactly is their record of efficiency that justifies this casteist comment on 85 per cent of the population? In any other context, such blatant deceit and hypocrisy would not have been tolerated, but then caste *is* quite a unique context for us Indians.

The extraordinary unanimity exhibited by the press is truly astonishing. Has it occurred to any honest press person—for reason drives us to presume that some among them must be honest people—to ponder whether this unanimity is caused exclusively by a superior concern for the future of this nation that the press possesses and that Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal[6] did not—and Ram Vilas Paswan[7] and Mulayam Singh Yadav[8] do not—or by the more mundane fact that the entire press corps is staffed by Forward Caste Hindus, and that too principally brahmins? After all, they disagree about everything under the sun; about capitalism and socialism, the private sector and public sector, Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh, Devi Lal[9] and Arun Nehru,[10] about every conceivable matter concerning the public life of this country. Why then does this remarkable unanimity prevail, all the way from the unlikely pair of Arun Shourie and Girilal Jain, through the English language columnists—who have probably never seen the poor village brahmin and his destitute children about whom they are filling copious columns now, and many of whom probably have precious little of our cultural ethos left in them but still cannot forget caste prejudices—right down to the scribes of the vernacular press that normally echoes Devi Lal's diatribes against the Arun Shouries and the Goenkas[11] of the newspaper world?

Everybody knows that if employment were the only issue involved, reservation by itself would be a small issue. The role of the public sector in employment generation, which has never been commensurate with its share in investment, is now gradually being decreased. The initiative in investment is passing into the hands of the private sector, and there is free talk of handing over even basic industries to the private sector. Even essential services like education and health are getting privatised rapidly. Many state governments are already implementing reservation for BCs within the public sector, and anyway V.P. Singh has promised that he would not 'impose' the decision to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations on any state government, a promise that has promptly been followed by announcements from the chief ministers of Orissa and Himachal Pradesh that their states would not implement the decision; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would have followed suit if only both the states had not had yadav chief ministers. Within what is left, V.P. Singh has excluded defence establishments, scientific and technological research institutions, and central government educational institutions from reservation for BCs. What this leaves out, for all practical purposes, is a few jobs like postal runners and railway booking clerks, which is clearly nothing much to get excited over either way. The highly emotional opposition to reservation, therefore, must be seen not in the context of employment and unemployment, but in the context of the caste system, and the continuing role it is playing in determining the distribution of resources and political power. It is precisely because the policy of reservation attacks the caste system, an attack that the Indian polity can illafford, that there is so much fuss against it.

In order to arrive at a comprehensive assessment, one has to view the totality of resources available in the country, and the institutional means

6 Chairman of the Mandal Commission.

7 Dalit leader from Bihar, who was a leader of the Janata Dal then and is president of the Lok Janshakti Party today. Paswan has been a union minister in several governments.

8 Prominent BC leader in North India, founder of the Samajwadi Party, three times chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and also former union defence minister.

9 Devi Lal (1914–2001) was a farmers' leader, chief minister of Haryana, and deputy prime minister of India when V.P. Singh was prime minister.

10 Cousin of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and a minister in his cabinet. He later defected to V.P. Singh's Janata Dal, and is also politically close to the BJP.

11 Ramnath Goenka (1904–91) was a newspaper baron and creator of the *Indian Express* group with various English and regional language publications.

by which they are apportioned among the people. Capital, land and the rest of nature are the three major resources whose ownership confers status and power; those who do not possess them labour on them to obtain a livelihood. The possession is for the major part with the Forward Castes or with the state, which is again principally accessible to them. This is not just an incidental correlation of caste and class, not just a historic relic, but a real relation and a living reality. Sudipta Kaviraj, an academic whose name figures in progressive circles, has managed to convince himself of the unreality of caste (according to his opinion as quoted by *India Today*) to the extent of remarking that asking Forward Castes to give up jobs in favour of the dalits merely because their [the former's] forefathers committed injustice ages ago is like saying that the Hindus can destroy the mosque at Ayodhya and build a temple there because some Muslim rulers in the past destroyed some temples and built mosques. It appears that when it comes to the caste question, we take leave not only of our intelligence and our sensitivity to the feelings of other people (how else does one explain the obnoxious stuff that Arun Shourie is filling the *Indian Express* with, day in and day out), but even our capacity to see things which stare us in the face.

Whatever Babur[12] did or did not do to the temple, which did or did not exist at the spot where Rama did or did not take birth, is a historic relic, a happening or non-happening of the past. Caste is very much a living reality. Caste was one of the principal determinants of the distribution of resources and power in medieval India, and *the* principal theoretical justification of exploitation. Today, it continues to play both the roles, in spite of a certain amount of capital penetration and political democratisation, with the principal difference being that it is today juridically displaced from the high place it had enjoyed during the age of the Dharmashastras. Caste is juridically dead, but very much alive politically and ideologically. If it is, in general, a theoretical fallacy to confuse the juridical form with the real content, one must be particularly careful in wishing away things which do not exist juridically, in a country like India, whose ruling classes do not possess the requisite measure of progressive potential to be able to afford even an ideologically camouflaged reflection of all real political and economic relations in juridical forms. The inability to see this point is one of the main reasons why marxist analysis of caste in contemporary India has generally been very unsatisfactory.

As regards, for instance, tickets to the assembly or parliament at election

[12] Zahir ud-din Muhammad Babur laid the foundation of the Mughal dynasty in India in the early sixteenth century.

time, public works and excise contracts, cooperative loans, industrial licences, supply contracts, managerial jobs in the private sector, a vice-chancellor's post, or even a favoured relation with the administration or a profitable position within the faculty of the universities where academics unburden themselves of weighty lectures on caste and class (among other things)—not one of these is obtained without the use of caste. Caste plays a significant role in shaping the composition of India's elite; the propertied classes use their caste to maintain and reproduce their status, and to acquire commensurate political power. Those among the Forward Castes who are not blessed with much property at birth use their caste to climb up the political ladder and subsequently acquire property. Caste also plays an important role in cementing the blocks within the elite for intra-ruling class conflicts, and for mobilising the middle classes for assaults against the poor. The poor among the Forward Castes—who are undoubtedly numerous—have one advantage which the dalits do not have, namely, the use of caste links with the rich to obtain a small job or a petty loan; all of them do not always succeed, but the possibility of their success is undeniably present.

The Forward Castes use their caste identity for all these purposes, but when the BCs attempt to use their caste identity to gain a foothold in the corridors of power—or even to get an ill-paid clerk's job—there is so much fuss about destruction of merit and the death of efficiency. The casteism of the Forward Castes is never seen as casteism, for the privileged groups always possess the advantage that their existence is taken to be part of the natural order of things. It is the challenge to that casteism which is actually seen as casteism. The unwritten reservation that the Forward Castes enjoy in the form of 'connections' is incomparably more potent than all the recommendations that Mandal has made for the benefit of the BCs, but that is not seen as reservation.

However, connections are not all; the list of reservations available in society is quite long, except that nobody thinks of them as reservation unless they take statutory form, and are meant for the benefit of the oppressed castes. Good public school education is reserved for children of the rich, and that reservation goes on for generation after generation. I am sure most people would find it terribly illogical if one says that just as everybody now argues that reservation in education to the dalits must stop after one generation, and that from the second generation onwards, they should fend for themselves, it should be equally made a rule that if parents have had public school education, their children and the subsequent generations must be denied access to such schools and must be made to

study in government schools. A cultural atmosphere at home that is conducive to book learning is reserved for the brahmins and the brahminised upper castes. It will no doubt be regarded as a monstrous suggestion if one were to say that since these people have enjoyed this reservation for so many generations, hereafter brahmin children would be removed from their homes at birth and brought up in a hostel, where they would have to share a common cultural atmosphere with children of the other castes. Access to the 'right connections' is another reservation widely prevalent in society, and that again is available only to the rich and the privileged communities. This reservation too, far from ceasing after one generation or two, goes on for generation after generation, and indeed becomes stronger as time goes on.

But the biggest reservation of them all is, of course, property. Property is reserved for the progeny of the propertied, for generation after generation, irrespective of talent or merit. It would no doubt be treated as sacrilegious if one were to suggest that hereafter property shall not be inherited by the children of the propertied, but by the persons who possess the greatest merit in handling it. After all, if it is a national disaster for jobs to be given to meritless persons on grounds of caste, it is equally a national disaster for property to pass into the hands of persons not competent to put it to use for no reason other than a genetic accident. And let nobody answer that if they are inefficient in managing property then they would lose it sooner or later, and let nobody prove a marginalist theorem to support this. We know very well that no such thing happens in real life.

The lawyers of the Supreme Court, in an astonishing step, boycotted work for a day in protest against the Mandal Commission even while the writ petitions filed against the Mandal Commission's recommendations were pending before the Supreme Court, and the court had announced the dates of hearing. If the matter was something that affected the lives and livelihood of the poor, these very same lawyers would have refused to so much as sign a protest note, on the ground that the matter is sub judice, and yet when it comes to the Mandal Commission, not just one or two of them, but a majority of the members of the Supreme Court Bar Association find it possible to boycott the court without any compunction whatsoever. Now, all these lawyers have five-figure monthly incomes, and quite a few of them have even six-figure incomes. Not one of them requires a government job for his or her children, and they have all the required connections to push them into the affluent private sector—starting with their own practice, which would be inherited by their children whether they possess any forensic talent or not. This fact itself proves that what is involved in this whole anti-Mandal mania is not employment but casteism, but that is not the point I want to make right now. The point is: will these legal luminaries agree to the passage of a law saying that hereafter the practice of a lawyer shall not be inherited by the son or daughter but by the most talented law graduate in the neighbourhood, for any such reservation on genetic grounds is destructive of merit, and harmful to the country?

This whole humbug about merit is the most trying piece of doublespeak the Indian elite has invented during the last four decades. It is difficult to believe that a man of the world like Arun Shourie—who certainly does not have the excuse of innocence which is the only plea that the anti-Mandal adolescents can possibly take—really believes that he occupies the august editorial chair at the *Indian Express* for reasons of sheer merit. Arun Shourie's egoism is evident in his style of preaching, but it is difficult to believe that even egoism can blind a man to such an extent. If Arun Shourie had not suited Goenka's politics, he would not be editing the *Indian Express;* and if he did not suit some proprietor's politics, he would not have been editing any paper at all, notwithstanding all the talent he may possess. He is certainly aware of this, and yet he finds it possible to fill that paper, the largest circulated English daily to this country's misfortune, with casteist filth day in and day out about the merit that the Forward Castes possess and the imbecility of the dalits.

What is most offensive is the definition being adopted for knowledge, competence, etc. We have inherited from brahminical Hinduism a most undemocratic definition of knowledge that dismisses as not worth knowing all that the working people know by the very nature of the work they do. They possess knowledge about cultivation, about weaving, about masonry and smithy, and even about the proper cremation of a dead body. This knowledge has been the basis of the reproduction of society's material life, and yet brahminism would not recognise it as knowledge. That non-recognition goes with the appropriation of the material wealth produced by them. You cannot allow the working masses to claim the title of knowledge for their skills and yet deprive them of the fruits of what they produce. And therefore, only knowledge about the *srutis*[13] and *smritis*[14] was recognised as knowledge, and proficiency in this alone signified

[13] Sacred texts, orally passed from one generation to the next, that comprise the central canon and span the entire history of what has come to be known as Hinduism, beginning with some of the earliest known Hindu texts and ending with the later Upanishads.
[14] Refers to a specific body of Hindu religious scripture, committed to writing, and is a codified component of Hindu customary law. It also denotes non-sruti texts and is generally seen as being secondary in authority to the srutis.

intelligence. If a democratic revolution had properly taken place in India, and if modern science and technology had grown out of the knowledge that the working people possess, perhaps we would have broken philosophically with this brahminical epistemology, but instead of that, we have completely destroyed even the basis for the traditional knowledge that the working people of this country possess and grafted on to our economy the science and technology borrowed from abroad in the form of textbooks, which again has been monopolised by the very same brahmins who have established a monopoly of book knowledge. Thus, the brahminical theory of knowledge continues to shape the curriculum of our schools and colleges, and it is proficiency in this knowledge defined as book learning that is being called 'merit'. One only has to imagine scrapping this curriculum and replacing it with knowledge about cropping, weaving, and carpentry, and imagine then how handicapped the brahminised upper castes would find themselves to be in such schools, to recognise the ridiculous snobbery of this whole debate about 'merit'. Either we get rid of this undemocratic educational culture, or else—since there are no signs of such a change—accept the necessity of providing reservation to those people who are at a disadvantage in this educational culture, not because they are incapable of book learning but because they have been deliberately kept out of it for ages. Since it is on the basis of caste that they have been kept out, it is only on the basis of caste that we can identify the needy in this matter. It requires a special blindness to ignore the fact that our cultural life is still caste-determined.

As for the rest, as long as caste remains one of the determinants of property and power, as long as it is used by the rich and the powerful as a means of maintaining and strengthening their domination, it remains the moral right and indeed the political duty of the poor and the deprived to use their caste identity in the struggle for their liberation. Class struggle and caste struggle are not two opposite or contradictory things, but are closely interwoven and coterminous struggles.

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasise that it is pointless to see the matter in terms of employment opportunities, their dearth or paucity. The whole issue is best seen within the context of the growing authoritarianism of the Indian polity. The Indian ruling class has passed the stage wherein it feels that it can accommodate the needs of the masses at least up to a point. Nor is it any longer really interested in long-term development on the basis of a planned use of the nation's resources. Instead, its various sections are busy grabbing all that they can lay their hands on, and this is a no-holds-barred activity. Not a single one of the measures meant for the welfare of the masses, especially the rural poor who mostly belong to the SCs, STs and BCs, has been implemented, nor are any of these measures likely to be implemented in the future. For example, land ceilings, minimum wages, dryland development, rural industries—not one of these has been blessed with implementation. On the other hand, the rural propertied classes are appropriating for themselves the control of not only land but all the natural resources that used to be available to the poor and provide them with some livelihood. Forests, fisheries, firewood—all of nature—has passed from the hands of the labouring people into the control of the rich.

In this situation, any assertion of the poor for better opportunities is met with a policy of 'no appeasement and ruthless suppression'. Movements of the rural poor are met with police brutality or the assaults of landlords' goons. And the aspiration of the upper fringe of the oppressed for a decent job or a share in political power is met with the kind of obscene attack that we are witnessing today. Just as caste identity is used to mobilise the middle classes under the *senas*, caste is again being used to incite the middle classes among the Forward Castes against the poor. Such a caste mobilisation can only be fought in caste terms, and there should thus be no inhibitions on that score.

Meham in Nandyal

EPW, 16 November 1991

What Meham[1] did to Devi Lal[2] and his son—albeit nothing much in a material sense, but quite a lot by way of a spoilt reputation—Nandyal[3] should, in all fairness, have done to P.V. Narasimha Rao[4] by now. The gangsterism that his partymen exhibited at Kurnool, the district headquarters, during the nominations week (11 to 18 October) and his silent endorsement of their criminality would have destroyed his political reputation if either the political situation had been different or the critical instincts of our liberal intelligentsia had been truly honest and impartial. The situation, however, is not different, and our vocal urban intelligentsia is vocal only about certain issues and certain people. Devi Lal—whatever his hunger for power and lack of scruples—has stood for the interests of the rural rich, which makes his unscrupulousness an easy target for the moral outrage of urban intellectuals.

PV, however, is different. He is the new consensus man that the Indian ruling classes have discovered. Everybody is hoping against hope that he would somehow perform the magic of cementing the fissures within the ruling classes that have grown to yawning proportions. People had hoped that Rajiv Gandhi[5] would do it but found to their disgust that he was too small-minded to even visualise the task. They then put all their hopes on V.P. Singh and were happy to find some confirmation of their hopes in the beginning, which partly explains why they were all so angry with him when he brought up the 'divisive' Mandal Commission. Now, they are all looking up to PV to do the job. Such is the miracle that desperation can work that the image of PV created and publicised during the last few months has little resemblance to what the politically knowledgeable public in Andhra Pradesh knew him to be until he had the prime ministership thrust on him. He was a proverbially indecisive person, afraid to offend even rogues, accommodative of even scoundrels, lacking totally in assertiveness, and so on. That is what he was believed to be, and indeed that is what he is. But the desperation of the ruling classes for a consensus-maker has transformed him into an elderly statesman, a cool, moderate, balanced, altogether very capable person. The absurdity of this image will dawn on them soon with another crisis of hope as happened with Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh, but in the meantime, his reputation is that of a holy cow. And so the press writes of Nandyal as if what happened there signified just some more of the intimidation and violence that has attended all electioneering in recent years.

In AP, there is a supplementary reason for the silence, a certain unstated feeling that at long last we have a Telugu man as prime minister—so what if nobody among the Telugu-speaking people thought very highly of him till yesterday—and we should not spoil things for him by focusing disproportionately on petty things like abduction and assault of prospective candidates intending to contest against him. In any case, it is always possible to pretend that PV, cultured and reportedly the rather learned brahmin that he is, is above such things and that it is the uncouth reddy goons of

[1] After Devi Lal became deputy prime minister, his son Om Prakash Chautala succeeded him as Haryana chief minister and contested the assembly by-election from Meham in 1990. The Election Commission called for repolls twice in Meham following widespread booth-capturing and violence, including the planned murder of an independent candidate and the death of nine people. Meham has since become a synonym for booth-capturing and poll rigging.

[2] Devi Lal (1914–2001) was a farmers' leader, chief minister of Haryana, and deputy prime minister of India.

[3] Lok Sabha constituency in Kurnool district in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh.

[4] P.V. Narasimha Rao (1921–2004), former prime minister of India from 1991 to 1996, the first prime minister from South India. He won the by-election from Nandyal with a record margin of half a million votes, a win that was recorded in the *Guinness Book of World Records.*

[5] Rajiv Gandhi (1944–91) was India's youngest prime minister. He was assassinated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam while electioneering at Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu on 21 May 1991.

Rayalaseema who are responsible for the gangsterism. Nandyal, after all, has an illustrious history. Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy of the Janata Party[6] was sent to parliament from Nandyal in 1978 in an election in which all other seats in the state were swept by the Congress of Indira Gandhi. He won, not because the people of this corner of Rayalaseema reasoned differently from those of the rest of the state, but because the reddy landlords of this region decided to get him elected, come what may, and did so by transporting in lorries all suspected Congress voters—dalits, in particular—to the Nallamalai forest[7] of the Krishna river valley, and keeping them there till the polling was over. Sanjeeva Reddy went on to become president of the republic and played a role that matched in dubiousness the way he was elected to parliament.

It is no secret, however, that the gangsterism this time around was sanctioned by the union law minister, Kotla Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, and directed personally by his nephew Kothakota Prakash Reddy, one of the secretaries of the Pradesh Congress. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy would certainly not risk the prime minister's reputation without consulting or at least informing him. PV has never had a political base of his own even in his native district of Karimnagar, and the only way he can survive is by depending on one faction or the other of the warring gangs of landlords, contractors and real estate brokers that make up the Congress(I) in this state. If, this time, he has willingly put himself in the hands of the warlords of Rayalaseema, there is no doubt strong enough reason for that. And the reason has started unfolding itself. The warlords decided that they would get PV elected unanimously from Nandyal. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) cooperated with them, ostensibly because Telugu pride dictated that a Telugu prime minister contesting to complete the formality of getting elected to parliament should not be opposed. However, those who know better hint that there is a more ignoble quid pro quo involved, which pertains to the business and real estate affairs of the TDP leaders. The CPI(M) ridiculed the stand of the TDP leaders, but nevertheless decided not to field a candidate. The CPI too followed suit. These two parties, despite their frequent expression of concern about democracy, have, in recent years, always been more concerned about not involving themselves in activity that is likely to destabilise the polity than about any democratic principles.

[6] An amalgam of political parties, it formed the first non-Congress government at the centre in 1977.

[7] A section of the Eastern Ghats stretching primarily over the districts of Kurnool, Mahbubnagar, Guntur, Prakasam and Cuddapah districts in AP.

Only the BJP and two Marxist-Leninist groups fielded candidates to oppose PV. Motkuru Narsimhulu, a dalit MLA, who was elected to the assembly as an independent, also filed his nomination with the intention of campaigning on the issue of Chundur.[8] The Congress(I) leaders tried to 'reason' with these candidates and dissuade them from entering the contest but they were not willing to listen to this kind of 'reasoning'.

Apart from a feudal pique at any opposition to their decision to get the prime minister elected unopposed from their fiefdom, the warlords had another reason for being upset at the possibility of a contest. This was their fear that somebody would get one of the opposing candidates murdered and get the election countermanded. Sudhakar Babu, chairman of Kurnool municipality, who played the role of principal aide to APCC(I) secretary Prakash Reddy in the disgraceful drama of abducting the prospective candidates and keeping them in confinement till the nominations were closed, explained this fear in rather absurd terms to one of his astonished victims, 'You know how certain foreign hands are intent on destabilising India; they killed Rajiv and now we are afraid they will kill one of you to get the election delayed and make it impossible for our PV to continue as prime minister.'

However, the foreign hand, assuming that there is one long enough to reach across the southern bank of the Nallamalai forest and get to Nandyal, would find lots of local competition. In Cuddapah, the neighbouring Lok Sabha constituency (which is also going to the polls this time), one independent candidate was murdered last time to prevent the very ambitious Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy from entering parliament. Otherwise, he would perhaps have been one more addition to the already substantial community of Telugu ministers in PV's government. The hand that did it, far from being foreign, was very much native, in fact very much Telugu. The TDP leaders, terribly frustrated at not being allowed by Congressmen to go around and campaign for their candidate, picked on the most defenceless independent candidate and murdered him to spite Rajasekhara Reddy. What happened thereafter was even more macabre. The TDP leaders hoped that the dead man would be discovered by the police and the elections countermanded, but it was the Congress(I) people who discovered the dead body. They hacked at the corpse's face with an axe to make it unrecognisable and pushed it deep into some bushes by the roadside. The TDP leaders

[8] A village in Guntur district of AP, where on 6 August 1991, eight dalits were chased and massacred in broad daylight by a mob of reddys and telagas. See 'Post-Chundur and Other Chundurs' in Section VI.

panicked when they found no news of the candidate's death in the next day's papers and started making anonymous phone calls to the press reporters at Cuddapah about a corpse resembling such and such candidate having been seen at such and such place. The reporters, not wanting to offend Congressmen, who are incomparably stronger than the TDP in this region, refused to take the calls seriously unless the callers identified themselves. Finally, in an act of reckless desperation, TDP leader Tulsi Reddy himself rang up the reporters and asked them whether they had not heard about the corpse he had been hearing about.

In the meantime, Rajasekhara Reddy rang up the reporters and told them without any preamble not to take rumours of corpses seriously since he had reason to believe that the corpses were unrecognisable. By this time, the police too had heard the rumour, but were unwilling to take any decision, for, on the one hand, Rajasekhara Reddy is one of the unanointed monarchs of Cuddapah district, and on the other, he is the leading dissident in the state's Congress(I), and therefore, a thorn in the flesh of chief minister Nedurumilli Janardhan Reddy. So, the local police safely conveyed the rumour to Hyderabad and sat back awaiting instructions. Janardhan Reddy, with the sharp instincts of a professional go-between, which is what he essentially is, saw a good chance to undo his rival. He sent an inspector general of police (also a reddy from Cuddapah district, incidentally) to go and get the body identified and get the election countermanded, which he did quite efficiently. Cuddapah was then graciously offered to PV as a safe seat by Rajasekhara Reddy but PV preferred, for reasons of his own, to be obliged to Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy rather than Rajasekhara Reddy, and so the sitting MP of Nandyal, Gangula Pratap Reddy, was persuaded to resign and offer the seat to PV. Rajasekhara Reddy is trying his luck again from Cuddapah.

Such is the situation in Rayalaseema, and that is why it sounds so fatuous to hear talk about 'foreign hands'. Indeed, if the Congressmen were worried only about foreign hands, they would not have indulged in precautionary gangsterism on this scale. It is the native hands that they are really worried about, not the TDP this time, for the TDP has decided that it stands to gain nothing by obstructing PV, but the various contending Congress factions which are willing to do anything to spite each other, unmindful of the consequences. Congress gangsterism is such that they would not hesitate to precipitate a major crisis by getting the Nandyal poll countermanded if one or some of them felt threatened by the gain that is going to accrue to, say, Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, by PV getting elected from Nandyal.

If this fear of independent candidates getting murdered is the purportedly rational element underlying the gangsterism, the rest is typical warlord arrogance. 'We, the lords of Kurnool, led by the union law minister, have unanimously agreed and brought the prime minister all the way to Nandyal to get him properly elected and anointed, and how dare these petty people oppose our common desire?' These are the very words with which they berated the prospective contestants in their captivity; and they are sufficiently indifferent to the requirements of civilised appearance to express themselves in identical language to the press.

Getting the PM Elected

Here is how they set about their task of getting the prime minister elected from Nandyal. PV filed his nomination on 10 October. From 11 to 18 October, a gang of fifty to sixty goons camped permanently in the sprawling collectorate complex at Kurnool, the district headquarters, where the nominations had to be filed. The camp was based in the premises of the District Information and Public Relations office, but the gang swarmed all over the complex in search of their prey. Hand in glove with them were the police, present in equally large numbers, and who put at their disposal the arms, the intelligence and the lawful authority that they possessed. These unauthorised occupants of the premises made no attempt whatsoever to be inconspicuous. The district collector and other revenue officials, all of whom are executive magistrates, have their offices in the complex, and could not but see the gang camping there, but they chose not to notice what they saw. Their standard reply to all criticism has been that they 'received no written complaint from anyone about any unauthorised presence or unlawful activity on the premises'. With the gangsterism thus having been officially rendered invisible, there was nothing else to hinder it. All those who were suspected of trying to file nominations were abducted and kept hidden in a place called Madhavi Lodge, apparently owned by a relative of Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy. They were abused, in some cases beaten badly, and guarded by armed goons until 18 October, the last day for the filing of nominations.

There was no subterfuge in all this. The gang that camped in the collectorate complex was personally led by a galaxy of Congress(I) leaders: APCC(I) general secretary, Prakash Reddy; Kurnool municipal chairman, Sudhakar Babu; MLA from Pathikonda, Seshi Reddy; MLA from Kodumuru, Madangopal; former Member of the Legislative Council, Raghuram Reddy; the MP who vacated the seat for the prime minister,

As Suryaprakash stood near the door of the collector's room pleading with him, Sudhakar Babu, the municipal chairman, waiting outside the room, hidden from the collector's view, tried to grab the youth by the back of his shirt and pull him out. Suryaprakash pulled himself free and in the attempt nearly fell at the feet of the collector, who pretended ably that nothing untoward was happening. Suryaprakash, by his own account, gave vent to his frustration in choice abuse aimed at the collector and again demanded that he should be allowed to file his nomination unmolested. The collector replied that if he got the right certificate from the right official, the nomination would certainly be accepted, but he could help in no way if the prospective candidate dared not go out in search of the right official for fear of being abducted outside the door of the collector's office. Suryaprakash sat out the whole day in the collector's office and left after closing time, when he had no further reason to fear abduction, for that was the last day for nominations. Outside the collector's office, he met the municipal chairman and asked him out of curiosity why they were so intent on preventing nominations. That was when Sudhakar Babu gave his speech about 'foreign hands'.

By allowing the RPI[10] and ML[11] candidates and the sitting MLA Narsimhulu to file their nominations, the gangsters were partly recognising their limitations but partly, they were also not unduly perturbed because they felt that these candidates could look after themselves and would not get killed. It was the independents they were worried about, and come the evening of 18 October, they were satisfied that they had safely abducted and hidden all the independents. But they realised a couple of days later that they were mistaken. I. Koti Reddy, a high court lawyer from Hyderabad, a close friend of TDP leader Upendra, who had been one of the central government's legal advisers during the National Front government, had managed to file his nominations as an independent. He had gone to Kurnool in the car of Ravindranath Reddy, a notorious landlord of Mahbubnagar district, and BJP MLA from Alampur, who happened to be a close relative of his. At Kurnool, he went into the collectorate along with the entourage of the BJP candidate and was mistaken by the gangsters for a 'dummy' candidate of the BJP. It was two days later that they realised their mistake, and they immediately took revenge.

On the evening of 21 October, in the heart of Hyderabad city, a large number of Congress(I) goondas attacked Koti Reddy's son and smashed his car, shouting: did his father think that he was man enough to contest from Nandyal? The son went to the police station at Kacheguda in the city to lodge a complaint. By the evening, he found that he was being treated as a criminal and not a complainant. The police claimed that the attack was a sequel to a brawl that the youth had been involved in sometime ago and had nothing to do with the father's politics. They abused him for lodging a false complaint. Both father and son realised that in spite of all their big connections, they were up against the kind of shameless collusion that they did not have the stomach to fight. A week later, Koti Reddy announced that he was withdrawing from the contest at Nandyal.

That is how India's latest prime minister, the first from South India, is entering parliament.

[10] The Republican Party of India has its roots in the Scheduled Castes Federation, founded by Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

[11] Marxist-Leninist, as the various naxalite political formations are sometimes referred to.

AP Elections, 1994

What Happened and What Did Not Happen

EPW, 21 January 1995

Somebody has remarked tongue-in-cheek that the two-party system has come to stay in Andhra Pradesh. The characteristic feature of this much-hankered-after state of political grace is that there are two hardly distinguishable political formations, each with its own constituency of loyal voters, while the non-loyal voters shift from the one to the other in sufficient measure from one election to the next to ensure that governments keep changing with predictable regularity, if not an entirely predictable periodicity. Critics lacking in the blessed spirit of charity would call it a Tweedledum–Tweedledee political system, but it is no doubt better than having a single Tweedledum ruling in perpetuity. For one thing, while the general social and political character of the government remains the same from one change to the next, there is some check on how cavalierly the rulers can play games with the people. The Congressmen of AP, who took their power for granted, got a shock this time that they have not recovered from even a month afterwards.

Secondly, the competition for the votes of the elusive voters who sit on the fence and amuse themselves by voting this way once and that way the next time does lead to an attempt, however partial it may be, to meet the dire needs of the voting public at large, a healthy fallout of political uncertainty that Manmohan Singh's admirers describe as populism. Blessed is this populism without which many more would have starved to death in this land, which is marching from brahminical cruelty to capitalist cruelty, from the rule of dharma to the iron rule of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thirdly, there is this thing called 'empowerment of the powerless' that everyone talks of a lot these days. One is not talking of the gratuitous empowerment that the CPI and CPI(M) are enjoying in AP this season, but the empowerment of what the Supreme Court has with infelicitous contempt described as the 'creamy layer'[1] of the dalits and the Backward Castes (BCs). For all its much despised creaminess, this class or class fraction would have had little chance of coming close to positions of power if a Congress clone such as the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had not come about and afforded the dynamic among the lower castes a chance to play one party against the other and push themselves into positions of power in this party or that. Of course, this too is 'populism', for it is not necessarily congruent with the most efficient use of the nation's resources that is the ruling dogma of today's India.

All this is not to say that the emergence of alternatives to the Congress such as the TDP signifies the best that could have happened in this best of all possible worlds, for that would be taking a needlessly pessimistic view of an admittedly imperfect world. This is because the deadening effect that this replication of the Congress by other names has on the political culture of a people is an incalculably vicious consequence of the emergence of charismatic fakes such as N.T. Rama Rao. The purpose of this prologue, rather, is to caution, on the one hand, against contemptuous attitudes towards 'populism', and on the other, against the inability to see that in human affairs, desirable ends can and frequently do realise themselves in seemingly immaterial, utterly uninspiring, and even incongruous changes. The human historical agent is no match for its own glorious aspirations, and as much progress in its affairs (as well as resistance to retrogression) is wrought by incongruous irrelevancies as by revolutionary planning and firmness.

It is also necessary to caution against a third attitude, which is being developed into a whole myth by CPI(M) circles. This is to read in the recent victory of the TDP a rejection of P.V. Narasimha Rao's economic reforms. The CPI and the CPI(M) are at liberty to collect around them all manner of

[1] In *Indira Sawhney* vs *Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477, the Supreme Court held that socially advanced members of a Backward Class that is, the 'creamy layer', have to be excluded from the BC list, and the benefit of reservation under Article 16(4) can only be given to the class which remains after the exclusion of the 'creamy layer'. It held that the creamy layer must be identified on the basis of social advancement and not on the basis of economic interest alone.

political creatures, including Congress clones, crooks and opportunists, who would rather be in the Congress than outside it, and in this free world, one cannot prevent them from christening this motley grouping a left and Democratic Alliance or a national alternative or whatever; but one should firmly insist that they stop interpreting reality to suit their tactics. Assuming that the TDP were to win on a vote for cheap rice, that would only indicate popular resentment at rising prices and hungry stomachs. It is part of an unfortunate culture of interpretation that has become common with marxists to argue that since the recent spurt in prices is a consequence of economic liberalisation, the vote against price rise is objectively a vote against liberalisation. The gap between this reductionist interpretation and the actual consciousness of the people is an abyss that renders the interpretation a particularly poor case of wishful thinking. It is the wishful realisation of two elusive desires—one, that the people at large should recognise that economic reforms are bad for them, and should consciously reject them; and two, that the left forces should succeed in leading the people to the realisation.

It is, of course, a matter of delight to believe that the Telugu people stood up firmly against the prime minister's regressive economic policies and gave the old man a resounding rebuff for having presumed that because he is a 'child of the Telugus', the state would vote by him in a time of crisis. It is indeed true enough that the sentimental response that he expected (he used the word *bidda* which means daughter rather than son in his native Telangana, and, in general, Telugu usage connotes the child in its dependent and helpless aspect) was not forthcoming from the electorate. Yet, happy though one would be to arrive at such a conclusion, there is little reason to see the defeat of the Congress as principally a rejection of the prime minister's presumptuous appeal for support to his structural adjustment policies. Of the three reasons offered for the victory of the TDP, namely, the rejection of the economic reforms, vote for NTR's cheap rice and prohibition policies, and infighting within the Congress, the third and least glamorous reason appears to have been the most significant, howsoever reluctant we may be to accept such unromantic conclusions. Economic reform in the abstract was an irrelevant matter not only because the people at large are far from being aware of its implications and of being conscious in rejecting it, but also because NTR is hardly anti-liberalisation. Like most Congressmen, he is as much a convinced advocate of the philosophy of the market as he is utterly feudal in his cultural attitudes, and the TDP has never spoken out against liberalisation as such, though it has put the issue of the consequent price rise to skilful electoral use.

The cheap rice scheme has no doubt attracted people, and quite rightly so, irrespective of whatever may be said by persons who are worried about budgetary discipline. The question of budgetary profligacy cannot be divorced from the larger question of how and on what basis the nation's resources are being shared out, and when that is left either to the bureaucrat–politician nexus or the laws of the capitalist jungle, in neither of which the weak have any place, they are bound to seek protective schemes from the government on pain of voting it out, especially because what such schemes eat into is a kind of administrative or infrastructural investment that does not solve their food and employment problems, except by offering an unredeemable assurance.

Much the same can be said about prohibition. The movement for total prohibition that occurred in AP after country liquor (arrack) was banned in 1993 upon pressure from the rural women's struggle, was, in fact, not a movement aimed at matching the earlier anti-arrack struggle. The modern variety of inebriating fluid called IMFL[2] is an addiction among the middle class, lower middle class, and organised working class men, and while the women of these families are as much its victims as the women of the rural labouring classes are of arrack, they did not come out into the streets as the latter did. The total prohibition agitation was a meetings-and-seminars affair promoted through the press by *Eenadu*, a paper that combines anti-Congressism with a determined effort to recreate lost legitimacy for the state's ruling elite. Yet, both the main political parties were fearful of the appeal that the issue may have for women voters. Men are evidently never fully sure that the weighty arguments they offer (ranging from reasons of common sense to those of fiscal sense) for their inability to cure themselves of the addiction to drinking as a habit and their addiction to the business of drinking as a very lucrative economic activity, would ever convince women who suffer physically, emotionally and economically from it. So NTR jumped in and declared that he would impose total prohibition within half an hour if he were voted to power, and the Congress chimed in, saying that (though nobody believed them) they too would do so in due course, regardless of the fact that both the parties are chock-full of manufacturers and vendors of liquor, licensed or illicit.

Yet voting statistics do not show that the cheap rice scheme and prohibition were primarily responsible for NTR's phenomenal victory. The

[2] Indian Made Foreign Liquor. A term used to denote Western-style hard liquors like whisky, rum and vodka, which are manufactured in India. It is used to differentiate them from indigenous varieties like arrack, toddy and fenny.

percentage of votes that the TDP and its allies got this time was not substantially higher than what they got last time, though as the polling percentage was higher this time, it means that a larger proportion of the electorate voted for them. What is striking is not the increase in the votes won by the TDP (plus allies) but the fall in Congress votes, which appears to have been to the extent of as much as 12 to 14 percentage points. A small part of these votes went to the TDP, another small part went to the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, but the major part of it went to Congress rebels. This cornering of votes by Congress rebels is a very significant fact revealed by the voting statistics. The Congress has truly become a veritable jungle of clawing and biting wild animals, which are unmindful of the possibility that they would destroy the species in the process. No tears need be wasted over this, but their unconcern is a study in depravity. In district after district, it was the senior Congressmen who first of all played all possible dirty games to get the candidates of their choice nominated, and when they failed against the wily Congress president who can play as dirty games as any of them, they set up their own candidates against the official nominees, or otherwise queered the pitch for their party. MPs Dronamraju Satyanarayana in Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram and Srikakulam districts; Magunta Subbarami Reddy in Nellore and Prakasam districts; Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy in Cuddapah and Anantapur districts; Rayapati Sambasiva Rao in Guntur district; Ganga Reddy in Nizamabad district; former union minister Jalagam Vengal Rao in Khammam district; and smaller fry elsewhere did their worst to get Congress candidates defeated. Their success in this effort was the most significant factor in deciding the huge margin of the Congress' defeat.

It is not as if the Congress would have won but for this factor. The prohibition, the cheap rice scheme and general disgust with the Congress had already done enough to stabilise the normal TDP vote and to decide the minds of the fluid voters. But for the Congress infighting, it appears that the TDP would, in any case, have won but with an unspectacular margin that would have left no scope for the largely misplaced encomiums that the Telugu electorate is receiving for its perspicacity, firmness and wisdom, nor any room for myth-making about popular rejection of the structural adjustment policies.

II

Apart from the price rise, and resultant deterioration in living conditions, the other significant issue in the elections was whether and to what extent persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Backward Classes (BCs) would come into positions of power in the changed context of post-Mandal politics. Such an aspiration can be dismissed as seeking power 'within the present oppressive system' as many marxists have done, but since precisely one of the oppressive characteristics of the present system is that positions of importance and authority are denied (both by virtue of the socio-economic structure and by conspiratorial tactics) to persons of the lower castes, such an aspiration is not a desire for change 'within the system' but is instead an attempt to dent the system in terms of at least one dimension. This much is true, irrespective of whether one believes that this would, in due course, generalise itself into a larger assault on the system in all its oppressive dimensions, or one suspects that it would end with a widening of the social base of the Indian state and capital. Indeed, which of these two would eventually occur is not something that can be predicted beforehand.

The victory of the Samajwadi Party–Bahujan Samaj Party (SP–BSP) in Uttar Pradesh on the basis of an explicitly anti-hindutva campaign inspired many dalit activists in AP to join the BSP and try to build it into a major political force in AP. Kanshi Ram,[3] too, took a lot of pains to campaign in the state. The dalit movement has developed into an important political force in AP during the last decade, and a very sizeable part of the movement joined the BSP, unfortunately bringing with it its internal contradictions too. The other sizeable stream to join the BSP (especially in the Telangana districts) was that of former naxalites, among whom K.G. Satyamurthy and Chiranjeevi are the most prominent.

Nobody expected the BSP to win many seats in the elections, though BSP leaders, in imitation of the dominant political culture whose tone is set by the Congress, made vastly exaggerated claims about the seats they would win and the policies that their government would adopt. While the overstatement was very evident, most people were wary of cautioning them for fear of being dubbed as anti-dalit, a term of abuse as potent today as 'petit bourgeois' was in the heyday of the now faded glory of communism. As it happened, the BSP won no seats and indeed it lost its deposit in all but one constituency, with the exception being Bapatla in Guntur district where Katti Padma Rao, founder-general secretary of the AP Dalit Mahasabha did quite well.

However, the entry of the BSP into the electoral politics of AP in a big way signifies not the possibility of immediate political power but the shifting of dalit political consciousness from the agitational arena to the electoral

[3] Kanshi Ram (1934–2006) was the founder of the BSP.

arena, and its consolidation therein as a political party. If the BSP leaders had acknowledged this distinction, disciplined their claims accordingly, and concentrated on organisational work and on the elaboration of the full logic of their principal campaign slogan, '*Vote hamara, seat tumhara—nahin chalega, nahin chalega*',[4] they need have caused no disappointment to their hopeful followers and sympathisers at the end. They spoilt things by neglecting organisational work to the point that they went through the elections without any organisational structure at all, and were dependent solely on Kanshi Ram's image and the appeal of their ideology. They also made no attempt to set right the internal divisions, which soon became public in ugly scenes at the time of seat allotment; and by allowing disenchanted SC and BC leaders from the Congress and TDP, for whom the dalit activists have no regard, to enter the party and acquire importance in it.

The other outcome expected from the entry of the BSP was that regardless of whether the Congress won or the TDP won, more persons from the lower castes would attain positions of political importance, which also would signify a social advancement, irrespective of what one thinks of the Congress and TDP as political parties. For the first time perhaps in the history of the Congress party, BC and SC leaders talked openly about the injustice done to the lower castes by the Congress leaders in the allotment of seats and offices. Although they would add the ritual declamation that Kanshi Ram was an adventurer and that the Congress alone would solve the problems of dalits under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, 'great friend of the weaker sections', it was evident that they owed their new-found courage to that very adventurer and not to the great friend of the weaker sections. On the other hand, the Congress leadership became jittery at the large turnouts at Kanshi Ram's public meetings in the beginning. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, the Congress chief minister of the state, mobilised Congress leaders of each of the toiling castes to hold rallies of that caste at Hyderabad to which he himself would be invited as chief guest and would promise all things under the sun to that community, such as subsidised yarn to weavers, quarries to stone cutters, excise contracts to toddy-tappers, etc. As the day of ticket distribution neared, grand promises were made that a large proportion of the Congress tickets would be given to persons of the lower castes.

Simultaneously, upper caste leaders for the first time started acknowledging the issue of caste openly. They gave up the earlier pretence that they had been dominating politics by virtue of sheer merit. Brahmins held meetings at Vijayawada, Nellore and Hyderabad, wherein one of he demands made was that they should be allotted the tickets to certain specified constituencies, as the brahmin population therein was sizeable. This is the kind of argument that in the past only Muslims, Christians or BCs would have used, and would have been branded narrowly casteist or sectarian by brahmins. Kamma Congressmen, who have always felt overwhelmed by the reddys in that party, held a meeting and resolved obliquely that all castes should be given tickets in proportion commensurate with their 'importance', which, in their case, means not only numbers but also economic power, of which they have plenty. In response, the reddys took visible pains to explain away their embarrassing preponderance in the Congress. Thus, bahujan politics had achieved the first victory that any rebel movement aspires for—to force the dominant groups to dump their myths and acknowledge the hidden aspects of reality.

Unfortunately, the opportunities opened up by these developments slipped away as elections neared, with a visible decline in the euphoria surrounding the BSP. The Congress and TDP leaders soon felt quite reassured, and not many more seats were allotted to the SCs and BCs than is usual. In NTR's new cabinet, the number and the importance of the posts given to the SCs and BCs is not very different from the past. A beginning has, however, been made in the matter, and the future can witness more significant changes if the BSP leadership draws the requisite lessons from this experience.

III

There was plenty of violence too. Rayalaseema warlord gangsterism has, in the last few years, become a major topic of lament in AP. One reason for this could be the legitimacy problems that it creates for the rulers, especially in view of the democracy versus violence antithesis that dominates their discussion of Naxalism. Another reason is the growing awareness of democracy and democratic rights among the people of Rayalaseema. A third reason is the growth of the gangsterism into a major cancer in recent years, with its transmutation into an instrument of moneymaking and political advancement. As a consequence, violence has accompanied all recent elections, as has the exhortation that the violence should be—and the promise that it would be—contained in the interests of democracy. This time around, the fear of Seshan[5]—of his arbitrariness rather than the

[4] 'We will not allow you to rule us with our vote.'

[5] T.N. Seshan was the chief election commissioner of India from December 1990 to December 1996.

legal authority of the Election Commission, of whose exact extent nobody, not even Seshan, is clear—restrained the contenders somewhat, but nevertheless there was plenty of rigging, bomb-throwing and killing. At Dhone in Kurnool district, from where Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy contested, all the village factions united to rig the polls in the then chief minister's favour, and there was none left to protest. The village Alampur in neighbouring Mahbubnagar district saw a triangular fight that showed electioneering in the faction-ridden area in the most ludicrous light. The Congress candidate was a recent convert from the TDP, and the TDP candidate conversely, a recent convert from the Congress, with both of them being reddy factionists from Kurnool district, having been transported to Mahbubnagar district as a solution to the impossible seat distribution problem. The third candidate was the sitting BJP MLA, also a reddy factionist, but a local man. As a local voter described the three in helpless humour, 'One makes bombs in his house, one on the terrace, and one in the basement.' The three of them made such thorough nonsense of the polling process that the entire constituency had to have a repoll, certainly an unusual thing.

However, an entirely humourless terror stalked northern Telangana this time. The obstinate attempt by the People's War Group (PWG) to obstruct the poll campaign at all cost, and the determination of the police to thwart this attempt equally at any cost led to a spate of violence in which more than fifty lives were lost. Neither those who believe in electoral politics nor those who reject it would reckon it worth so many lives. The PWG asked the people to boycott the polls as usual and also threatened the contesting candidates not to campaign, on pain of physical violence (they made an exception from this ban on campaign for the CPI(ML) candidates and the BSP candidates). As regards the campaigners who violated this rule, their vehicles were burnt and their bones broken. The police moved in, not merely to protect the contestants from this violence, but also to defeat the PWG's political tactics and to ensure that votes were polled in large numbers. This much has happened in the past elections too. The ostensible purpose of the police has been to ensure that voters can vote 'freely and fearlessly', though it is a matter of common knowledge that while the PWG has violently prevented the contestants from exercising their legitimate right to campaign, it has not interfered with the people's right to vote, in case they choose to disobey the PWG and go and vote. But this time around, no bones were made about the real purpose of the police: they were not there to merely protect the contestants' right to campaign and the voters' right to vote, but to defeat the entire political effort of the PWG vis-à-vis the elections, no matter that it is no part of their job to do so. The police held meetings in village after village in which inspectors would openly threaten people that if they did not vote, their ration cards would be withdrawn, the electricity connection to the village would be cut, and their children would be denied social welfare scholarships. It was certainly an odd way of giving confidence to voters who may wish to defy the PWG's direction.

In order to aid the AP police, a large number of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Border Security Force men were dumped in the PWG-influenced districts. A particularly vicious and drunken lot of paramilitary commandos were brought from Punjab and stationed in Karimnagar district, apparently because more terror must be inflicted to ensure that votes are polled in the prime minister's native district. The manner in which these Punjab commandos behaved is testimony to what can happen if the police are allowed to develop into a lawless force in the name of suppressing political or social lawlessness. Drink and women were the principal interests of these commandos. They drank everything they could lay their hands on, pawed women in village lanes, raped a vegetable seller in Ramagundam, and succeeded in driving women off the streets in panic wherever they were stationed. When the harassed people complained to the local police, those worthies who are usually a terror to everyone, expressed helplessness and suggested that the women keep to their homes until 'those fellows leave the district'. Not to be outdone, men of a CRPF platoon stationed at Kataram raped another woman, a dalit labourer named Salamma, who was, however, helped by press reporters to go to the district collector and superintendent of police and lodge a complaint. The administration ordered an enquiry into the matter by a woman officer of the Indian Police Service, who managed to coerce the victim to say that she had not been raped by anyone but had got drunk and fallen, and then started eliciting the 'background' of the pressmen who had taken interest in the matter.

The strategy adopted by the police to defeat the PWG's intentions was to gather from each village youth who were known to be sympathisers of the PWG and to hold them hostages from about a month prior to the day of polling. The implicit threat was that they would be objects of retaliatory killing if the PWG indulged in excessive violence. It was also intended that these youth would be lined up before polling stations and compulsorily made to vote on polling day, as a demonstrative exhibition of the success of the police in defeating the intentions of the PWG. Not many people in this country would perhaps believe that about 3,000 youth were thus held like slaughter animals in police custody for the entire month of November.

The PWG, for its part, as if to challenge the police to kill the hostages, senselessly landmined two vehicles carrying policemen and killed sixteen persons including a few civilians, in the last week of November.

The first incident took place at Lenkalagadda, an interior village in Karimnagar district, in which some Punjab commandos travelling in a tractor were blown up and killed along with the tractor driver and the local sub-inspector of police; and the second incident occurred right near Warangal town, and on a state highway to boot, killing paramilitary men of the AP Special Police. The second landmine was apparently intended for the Congress government's municipal administration minister, Madadi Narasimha Reddy, an old enemy of the PWG, but he escaped and a police escort vehicle was hit.

This macabre challenge was expectedly taken up by the police and there ensued a killing spree in which thirty-five persons were shot dead—thirty-four in the Warangal and Karimnagar districts, and one in Nizamabad district. Most of them were picked up from their homes or places of work in full view of and against the protests of their kith and kin, and colleagues, and shot dead within a few hours in some neighbouring village. Oddly enough, the police did not kill any of the 3,000 suspected sympathisers who were already in their custody. That would not have created sufficient terror, and it is terror that the police want to perpetrate. So they went one step ahead, and picked up youth who had not even been considered to have enough links with the PWG to merit prior detention, and killed them. All the killings except one were the handiwork of the local police, with the one exception being worthy of detailed mention. The victim in the latter case was a 45-year-old dalit woman, Manthena Rajamma of Lakkepur in Karimnagar district, a mother of five daughters and a son. On the afternoon of 29 November, some Punjab commandos from Gajulapalli camp went to Lakkepur on a raid, searching for hidden naxalites or hidden ammunition. They were fully drunk on toddy and heavily armed with automatic weapons. When they approached Rajamma's house, she tried to leave by a side door for she was alone in the house and was scared at the prospect of the search. But they spotted her and gestured to her to come back. They entered the house and found one of the two rooms locked. They asked her to open it. As the terrified woman fumbled with the key for a minute, one of the impatient commandos aimed his gun at her and shot her right through her back. The bullet killed her, went through the locked door, and emerged out of the other wall to lodge in the wall of the neighbour's house. The drunk commandos then went out telling the horrified villagers, '*Buddhi mar gayi*' ('The old woman has died').

This killing went on till 3 December, while polling in North Telangana was to be held on 5 December. On the previous evening, the youth in custody were sent home to vote and get votes polled in their villages the next day, and to come back again to report at the police station the day after polling. The implied threat again was that if not enough votes were polled, the youth could be killed. Indeed, the threat was not left implicit. It was stated bluntly. In any case, there was quite heavy polling in the North Telangana districts and all Congress heavyweights including the prime minister's son and his in-law lost massively. The losers themselves attributed their defeat, at least partly, to the methods adopted by the police (with their sanction, of course, though they would dishonestly put all the blame on the police after their defeat).

In the course of this bloodbath, the main issue between the two armed contenders was left undecided: how many people would have voted, and how many would have boycotted the polls, if they had had peaceful conditions for the exercise of their choice? And in the interests of what great principle had so many lives been lost?

IV

The final question that remains is: What do elections signify in the new politico-economic consensus of the ruling classes? Economic liberalism does not render political power irrelevant, for what it nullifies is not governmental authority but governmental social responsibility. The Indian state of the 1990s is not a powerless political entity, not the ideal of nineteenth-century liberalism. What it has been freed from is only responsibility for the welfare of the people. The rest of its authority and responsibility are intact. And so it continues to be as profitable to be in the business of politics as it was in the days of the licence-permit raj; perhaps more so, for lots of money is flowing into the country now both in the private and public sectors: and with globalisation, the stakes of all politico-economic activity have been pushed up and are being computed in worthier currencies than the good old rupee.

The politicians' hunger for political office has, therefore, increased rather than decreased, and the private wealth that they have at their disposal has also increased with the multiplication of economic opportunities available to the propertied classes. They have, therefore, fought tooth and nail to secure tickets from winning parties and have used the most shameless means to get elected. It is trite to say that political morality has never been as low as this, for it gets lower and lower day by day and is always lower than it has ever been. The contingent human imagination, which (for all its

pretensions to unlimited vision) is bound by experience and possible extrapolation, believes on each day that it has sighted the nadir, but what it has seen is only the murkiest depths that can be imagined, the nadir of its imaginative capabilities.

The norms laid down by Seshan to discipline campaigning and to limit campaign expenditure to legally permissible limits has meant reduced publicity expenditure for candidates. This has actually hurt newcomers like the BSP and parties like the CPI(ML) groups, which participate in elections for gaining wide publicity for their views, slogans and symbols—crucial for them rather than the Congress and TDP. For the latter, the expense saved on this account has meant more to spend on unaccounted activity, such as the eleventh-hour distribution of cash and liquor, which is a common feature of Indian elections. Votes were paid for at an unprecedented rate this time but whether they were successfully purchased is difficult to tell. In any case, the TDP is not 'yesterday's baby' (to borrow Seshan's memorable caveat about himself) and can spend as much as the Congress, and so it probably made no difference in the end.

However, what elections mean for the voters in the new era is that this is one of the times when they can put pressure to force the political system to be answerable to their needs, regardless of the fact that such answerability is called 'populism' these days. As the social responsibility of the government has been officially discarded, it must be enforced through the collective assertions of the people. One such possible moment of assertion is election time, when the threat of voting politicians out of power can help bend official policies. Perhaps it is the recognition of this possibility that has, by a peculiar cognitive jump, turned itself into an interpretation (which is only partially true) of the disastrous defeat of the Congress in the AP elections this time.

Politics as Property

EPW, 7 October 1995

All political happenings are not significant events. Whether the toppling of N.T. Rama Rao in his ripe old age by a coterie directed by his own sons-in-law and abetted by his own sons is an event of any significance is a point that needs to be discussed. It can no doubt be said that it happened at a time when the man least deserved it—which is not saying much, for he has at every point of time abundantly deserved it—and for a reason that carries no great conviction with the people at large. His dear wife[1] was said to have been an 'extra-constitutional centre of authority', which means little because all authority in the Indian polity is in any case extra-constitutional, even when it derives formal sanction from the Constitution. More to the point, the old man's son, Harikrishna, who was a catalyst in the turbulence and has now become minister for transport in the son-in-law's[2] cabinet, is as much an extra-constitutional centre of authority as his much-maligned stepmother. This is because he too has presumed to dictate the shape of political happenings in the state without ever having been elected to the assembly by or in the name of the people, an act of anointment that is evidently accepted by common consent as a good enough entitlement for toppling, subverting or hijacking governments.

[1] Lakshmi Parvathi, NTR's second wife.
[2] N. Chandrababu Naidu, who was chief minister of Andhra Pradesh from 1995 to 2004.

A Hindu coparcenary being what it is, all property disputes among Hindu families carry an element of high drama. And castes such as the kammas, who have substantial property, have a community culture in which this drama is an understood and well-elaborated element. The early Telugu films, for instance, were in large measure nothing but the enactment of this familiar drama of peasant proprietor or landlord families on the screen, and NTR has acted in quite a few of them. In most such films, the dramatic denouement begins with the ageing of the patriarch, and is not uncommonly precipitated by his late infatuation with a young wife, a foster child or some such aberration that the heirs regard as senile delinquency. The fact that by that time the patriarch, irrespective of his past acts of despotic authority, is usually a mellowed man, a silver-haired specimen of contrition, or at least exhibiting a certain desire to make up with all and sundry, including the naxalites, in NTR's case, before quitting this world, generates a certain sneaking sympathy for him among the onlookers. And the heirs look even more villainous than they need to.

It was this drama of painful generational change in the property holdings of a Hindu joint family that Andhra Pradesh (AP) witnessed during the last couple of months. But what made it weird was that the property which the family was fighting over was the state of AP, its people, politics, and wealth. This itself, perhaps, is its significance, for AP is a state that prides itself on its radical history; it can justly boast of a significant political element that is radically critical of the existing and inherited order of things. That radical critique can also fairly claim that it has influenced people's perceptions and ways of looking at things in large measure. Yet the inadequacy of this history is such that a single family—no doubt a rather big and glamorous one—can fight over the state as its joint property, the way such families have fought over home and hearth for centuries in the feudal–patriarchal tradition. The people at large, including the more politically sensitive among them, are not only not outraged but find it quite amusing; or else, what is even worse, dismiss it as an irrelevant interlude in the grand progress of history.

However, it is perhaps possible to seek other points of significance as well. Indeed, one can even 'rationalise' the events to reveal a hidden meaning, a rational order disguised by maverick accidents, an analytical practice that radical—especially much of marxist—thinking has always been prone to. For instance, one may see in the rise and the subsequent crisis of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) the birth pangs of a self-conscious regional bourgeoisie, its strategies of consolidation, and their crises. Such rationalisation is one of the most fascinating things about radical critiques, and contributes a lot to their enduring attraction, notwithstanding repeated practical and predictive failures, but the fascination is in truth a distraction. Such a mode of analysis is faulty because what is filtered out in this process, and (to mix metaphors) thrown out like the peeled skin of a fruit is thereby surreptitiously rendered irrelevant and insignificant. It is usually not, a point that becomes unpleasantly evident when what is peeled off analytically to reveal the alleged rational core returns later—in real and not analytical time—to stick again to the fruit.

Let us try then to identify the significance of recent events in AP in as non-rationalising a way as possible. It is one thing to recognise order and causation where it exists, and to recognise human subjectivity in history; but quite another thing to seek the working out of a neat pattern of Reason acted out by social collectivities set up as historical subjects. All such thinking leads to overt or covert reification of history, which, in turn, leads to utopian prescriptions for putting an end to such history. And all utopias are anti-human, even the most humane of them. The human subject—both as an individual and as a collective—is too small to bear the heavy weight of utopias. It can only be crushed by them. A non-utopian radicalism requires a non-rationalising mode of analysis; a mode of seeking truth, for truth must necessarily be sought, that would accept reason but reject Reason, and would be adequately cautious in identifying patterns of orderliness and causation in history, while always keeping in mind that the history is *human,* and therefore, always carries with it a large quantity of contingency, in every sense of that term: finiteness, disharmony, incongruence, accident, whimsicality, and so on.

The birth of the TDP thirteen years ago was the political consequence of at least two phenomena. One is the dissatisfaction felt by a certain section of the regional elite in the state with the Congress party's strategies in dealing with the aspirations for political power in the states and regions. The sections of the regional landed–financial–commercial elite that possessed the advantage of substantial property, and cohesive homogeneity as well as a standing of social leadership within the caste system, such as the rich among the kammas of coastal AP, felt that they deserved more political power than the Congress was prepared to give them. The unwillingness of the Congress to bestow this power on them was due to many factors, which may not be susceptible to an ordering in terms of historical significance or decisiveness. One was the negative factor that the Congress party, with its unitary vision of India, did not like strong and self-assertive elites to develop in the states, which in its language would lead to 'fissiparous tendencies'. There were, however, less negative reasons

too. There was a felt need to accommodate the aspirations of backward regions and socially weak communities in the states by allowing their representatives, real or putative, to occupy positions of power. This meant that the most powerful regional elites would be sidelined, to some extent, or at least forced to share power and glory with the less deserving. But this positive factor contained within it another negative factor, which has been emphasised by Ambedkarite analysts. This was that the Congress, especially at the level of national politics, was dominated by brahmins, whereas the upcoming regional rich belonged to the sudra communities, which was one reason why the Congress expressed a preference for a unitary structure of the polity, and encouraged the less dynamic among the sudra communities, or those belonging to the backward and undeveloped regions within the states. This process was also congruent with the sociological fact that in the backward and undeveloped regions, the unity between the brahmin and sudra elites as the principal exploiting groups of pre-modern India has not been fully shattered, whereas in the developed regions, that unity had been breached even by 1947, for both economic and political–cultural reasons.

In AP Congress politics, for instance, the brahmin leadership has had a more or less cosy relation with the reddy landlords of Rayalaseema and Telangana, whereas in coastal AP, the kamma community's rise, in social and political terms, took place in an antibrahmin ambience, represented explicitly by the nonbrahmin Self-Respect[3] type of movements, and implicitly by the rationalist, atheist and communist movements. It was this kamma community that developed a very able and talented middle class and a powerful entrepreneurial elite by taking advantage of the positive material conditions prevalent in the region watered by the Krishna and Godavari rivers, which conditions became even better after the Green Revolution. And yet the rise to political power of this elite commensurate with its tremendous dynamism was blocked by Congress strategies.

While the resentment against this denial was one powerful mood behind the formation of the TDP, there was another whose contours have become clearer now than they were at that time. Regardless of whatever may have been true in 1947, by the 1980s all the states of India, considered as ethnic–linguistic regions, had developed an elite that was quite capable of taking charge of the affairs of the region. Today, there is little doubt that they can

[3] Founded in 1925 in Tamil Nadu by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (popularly known as Periyar), the influential Self-Respect movement gave way to the Dravidian movement and led to 'backward' class nonbrahmins seeking and wresting political power.

fully take command of their regions and rule them as ably as Delhi is able to rule India. A person like Chandrababu Naidu, the latest chief minister of AP, is equal to anybody in Delhi, whether in running an efficient administration, amassing unlawful wealth, or cutting his opponents' throats. He and his class do not need to be overseen by Delhi in doing their job. They have nothing left to learn—in terms of administration, commerce or criminality—from Delhi. India is today certainly ripe for federalisation, for this if for no other nobler reason. And if a morally desirable end is actually realised through not-so-noble pressures, then that would not be the first time it has happened in human history, nor would it be the last time.

This pressure of impatience felt by well-grown regional elites has been expressed in political language in the idiom of decentralisation, autonomy, federalism, etc. If it is true that these expressions are not to be taken literally as the actual aspirations of all those who talk in terms of them, then it is also true that they are not to be understood as mere ideology, in the sense of either a distorted representation of reality or, worse still, a camouflage for hidden material interests. The notions are just what they are: the values in terms of which actual aspirations are conceived, thought of and explained, following the general principle that in human thought, every particular idea or aspiration is conceived of and expressed in terms of universal values. In other words, this implies that the cognitive and the normative are inseparable in human thought, for human beings cannot make sense of their existence without making moral sense of it. Ideological camouflage is not ruled out here, but that is no more the essence of the matter than the naïve equation of values with actual aspirations. What is involved here is a structural property of human thought, which naturally operates in a social context.

Once such a universal value comes into existence, it is capable of being taken up and given fresh content in other aspirations; of being attached to or reinterpreted in other contexts so as to give rise to new aspirations, and energise hitherto dormant political practices; of becoming part of social culture that shapes human potential into actual behaviour patterns; and thence also of realising itself in social institutions, social relations, and social practices beyond the intentions and arms of those in whose aspirations it originally found normative expression. The notion of ideology, even when we grant that 'it is capable of influencing material reality', is not sufficient to comprehend this important historical process. This is not to say that the notion is entirely useless, provided it is used within the limited space of its utility.

The emergence of self-sufficient elite with the slogan of federation is

frequently interpreted in terms of the rise of subnationalism or regional nationalism. Whether the interpretation is valid in a given case depends upon the details of that case, and the underlying rationalisation that ethnic upsurge is some sort of a law of the contemporary Third World, must be viewed with suspicion. As far as AP is concerned, there has been no rise of 'nationalist' feeling parallel with the change that we have been describing, for there is, in general, no strong feeling of 'Telugu-ness' comparable with what one finds among the Tamils and the Bengalis (not to mention the Kashmiris).

However, irrespective of whether or not an emergent regional nationalism has coincided in all regions of the country with the rise of self-assertive elites, there is one more change that has taken place. This is an urge that goes beyond the ruling class of the region and well into the middle class, to create a full-fledged modern community, a well-rounded civil and political society in the regions, by structuring the necessary institutions, conventions and norms. One may call this a process of the nation in the making, if there were a nation in the making. It cannot be assumed to be there merely because this urge is there. But even without the self-conscious notion of a 'nation' (with all the implied desires of a distinct destiny and identity), there can be an emergent desire for a coherently structured modern society with functioning institutions and respectable norms of public life, which is both desirable in itself (and actually desired by many in the developing community) and a precondition for the legitimacy of the governance of the region's elite. The unitary character of the Indian state, coupled with its gradual criminalisation, has left much to be desired in this matter. A strong desire to set this right and to shape a full-fledged modern society in which every conscious member of the community may take pride, and over which the regional elite may legitimately rule, is a strongly felt idea that comes through very vocally in the regional press, academic writings and literature. In AP, its strongest and most self-conscious representative has been the daily newspaper *Eenadu*, which silently prided itself on having brought N.T. Rama Rao to power in the first instance for this very end, and which is now no longer even very silent in claiming credit for having forced his replacement by his son-in-law, again to the same end.

Eenadu has not merely reported, but has taken a political stand while reporting all major public issues concerning AP in recent years. Here are two instances wherein its purpose coincided with larger democratic aspirations. The newspaper, over the last two years, has made it impossible for any government ruling the state to continue the familiar Indian liquor policy of making people drink more and more so that the government may balance its budget. The newspaper has also done much to focus the searchlight on warlord violence in the Rayalaseema districts, and create a reaction of disgust in the ordinary reader. The plaint of the warlord politicians of Rayalaseema that their region's profile has been deliberately maligned by a coastal AP testifies to its success in creating revulsion.

Both these campaigns no doubt hurt the Congress, and can easily be interpreted as part of that newspaper's anti-Congress politics, as they frequently are. But going beyond that, both these campaigns have contributed to a certain cleansing of public life in the state, which made them attractive to the public at large, and contributed to the regional elite's aspiration for a self-respecting civil and political society for it to rule over. NTR was not slow in picking up the cue. He was not very consistent in the matter of the political violence of Rayalaseema, for that violence has always been loyal only to power and not to any party, and NTR was not above the temptation of co-opting it instead of vanquishing it. In any case, for politicians of the present generation, the Cuddapah and Kurnool model of democracy, implemented through bombs and guns, offers a tempting alternative to the tedious business of cajoling an increasingly cynical electorate. But on the issue of liquor, NTR did not hesitate beyond the first couple of weeks. He loudly set himself up as the saviour of the agitating women.

However, the social urge represented by *Eenadu*'s politics goes beyond this. It demands economic and industrial modernisation and development. For that, it demands efficient and quick acting governance of the type that has made men like Pratap Singh Kairon[4] and Sharad Pawar[5] famous. It has heard of the Bombay–Ahmedabad industrial corridor and the throbbing entrepreneurial life of Punjab. The no-nonsense administrative efficiency that would appeal to local, national and multinational capital, and encourage them to transform AP in a similar image, is a much-prized thing in this view, which has acquired greater force and self-confidence in the era of Manmohan Singh. This requires, among other things, a certain mood of purposeful governance, quick decision-making and political balance. It is here that *Eenadu* and the substantial segment of AP's elite that is like-minded with it, perceive NTR as having failed. This dissatisfaction of theirs

[4] Kairon was chief minister of Punjab province (then comprising Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh) from 1952 to 1964. He is sometimes referred to as the 'father of modern Punjabi politics'. He was instrumental in setting up the Punjab Agricultural University, which played a key role in the Green Revolution.

[5] A former Congressman, and an extremely wealthy and powerful leader from Maharashtra, Pawar founded the Nationalist Congress Party in 1999. He has held ministerial positions in several governments and is also into the lucrative business of cricket administration. He is presently the union agriculture minister.

has been evident from the beginning of his political career. Like all people driven by purposeful rationality, these men were upset by the whimsicality of NTR, who is on a perpetual honeymoon with his own godliness. But they put up with him until he went and got himself a wife to whose ambition he was willing to sacrifice even the stability of the party and government. The TDP has, over the years, struck a balance between the unquestioned charisma of its undisputed leader, and the organisational grip of the elder of his two politically active sons-in-law. Within the terms set by this balance, the second-rank leaders learnt to locate themselves, assess each other's standing, and evaluate their respective chances of climbing up the ladder. This knowledge and the certainty that went with it made for whatever stability the TDP had, and it was this that was upset by Lakshmi Parvathi, NTR's second wife. A woman as greedy, as intelligent, as able and as ambitious as Chandrababu Naidu (and there is no third person in the party that could match either of them), she not only gave the son-in-law the jitters but completely upset the structure of opportunities that everybody in the party understood and related themselves to, in her effort, as a late-coming aspirant for the successorship, to create a base for herself in the party.

Naturally, the least valued men in the party gathered around her and entered the mansion of power 'through the kitchen', as the Telugu papers contemptuously said. It is an interesting sidelight that she literally made the kitchen her headquarters. Indeed, Lakshmi Parvathi's entire strategy has been built around symbols of wifeliness—the caring, cooking consort—which were meant to create acceptability for her politics by pretending to be what she was certainly not: a mere wife. But such is the unhappy lot of precocious individuals, who wish, for good or for bad, to grow out of socially given roles without questioning the roles and the attendant expectations.

The expectations, reinforced by a particularly vicious press led by *Eenadu*, helped Chandrababu Naidu and the jittery partymen who had gathered under his umbrella, frightened, as they were, by the sudden shaking of the familiar earth beneath their feet. 1995 has been a year of elections in AP. After the assembly elections, there was the entire electoral process for the three-tier panchayati raj, the municipalities and the cooperative societies. At each step, the TDP was shaken by conflicts over allotment of tickets, with Lakshmi Parvathi patronising candidates of her choice, who were mainly men who would otherwise not have stood much chance of breaking through the established party network to get tickets for themselves. At the end, when all the elections were over, the party had come close to an irremediable division. It only required the coming together of the two discordant sons-in-law, blessed by a disloyal son, Harikrishna, and as soon as that unity was cemented, the legislature party split, and NTR was dethroned. He made an ass of himself by parking his favourite campaign van outside the hotel where the disloyal legislators were camping and inciting the policemen present, who had by that time guessed which way the wind blew, to drag the dissidents from out of the hotel and hand them over to lawful custody, such being his notion of lawfulness. He later made a further ass of himself by demanding that the office of governor be abolished—though governor Krishna Kant had followed the procedure quite scrupulously—and that chief ministers must hereafter be elected directly like the president of the US so that they may be undisturbed in their whimsicality for five full years.

Throughout this terminal combat, *Eenadu* played a determined role by lampooning Lakshmi Parvathi's ambition, as if she were the first ambitious politician that this state has seen. It made copious use of the patriarchal distrust of an ambitious woman who gets married to a wealthy and powerful old man, whose brain is suspected to have gone soft of late. This is the acme of vampishness in a woman, and Lakshmi Parvathi was guilty of this. Nothing more was needed for a determined campaigner to damn her.

The ruthless campaign is matched by the man it has brought to power. Chandrababu Naidu is a cut-throat politician of current vintage. He is also ably suited for the role that *Eenadu* and the opinion it represents hope he would play. Like any man who was born in a four-acres-of-dry-land peasant family from backward Rayalaseema and has made for himself umpteen crores by the time he is forty, he is abundantly endowed with what capitalism calls enterprise. But going beyond making money for himself and his cronies, he claims to have the vision required to structure a modern capitalist society endowed with the characteristics needed to reproduce itself as a matter of course. This, as we have said, is one vision that underlay the rise of the TDP. There is no inevitability of its success, and no ruse of Reason that would work for its success. All that we can say is that for the present, it has the national and international climate in its favour, apart from whatever internal dynamism it has. But then that climate itself contains much that may ultimately disfavour or distort it to suit a different purpose. And the internal dynamism operates in a specifically Third World environment.

However, politics in AP has always provided space for other visions and other values that can inform the process of the formation of a modern society. These are values of equality, justice and welfare. Regardless of whether these values are realisable in the absolute sense or not, they can function as a counterpoint to the kind of vision that *Eenadu* and

Chandrababu Naidu desire, and can drastically modify the outcome of the ongoing process of social transformation. It would have helped if the proponents of the alternative values understood the radical social model that they visualise as a counterpoint in ideals rather than the next phase of an ordered History. But it is an aspect of unavoidable human contingency that we have to put up as much with radical baggage of the past as with the conservative muck.

Chandrababu Naidu

The Man and the Times

EPW, 26 June 1999

Do the Times, so to speak, choose the right person, or does the right person latch on to the right Times? This is a hard question for a materialism that would not be vulgar, if it is at all necessary to use the word 'materialism', that is, when mere 'realism' would perhaps suffice. (The word 'choose' is still ambiguous; it contains two meanings—that the processes let loose by the Times shape the person suitably, or that they pick up the pre-existing person.)

The fact that changed Times produce changed ideas and bring persons holding the ideas to positions of dominance in various spheres of life is a matter of common experience, and appears to decisively demonstrate the simple proposition that ideas and their dominance are determined by 'material reality'. This simple proposition reveals itself to be rather complex when one realises that it is a sociological hypothesis rhetorically invested with the status of an epistemological truth. Whichever way one sees it, a greater complexity is revealed the moment one tries to define the changed Times minus the changed ideas, to locate the changed reality at any point prior to the existence of ideas about it.

However, from the point of view of philosophical humanism, the more interesting and intriguing question is this—since it is human beings who hold ideas (there being no other mode of existence of ideas that we may know of), and they hold them more or less intelligently, what exactly, in

human terms, is the process by which ideas appropriate to the Times become dominant in various spheres of life? The word 'dominance' here need not necessarily be understood in a pejorative sense. It could mean—more often believed, more widely propagated, more aggressively expressed, invested with greater authoritative truth (or, in the alternative, with greater common sense), supported more by the state or other powerful forces, or any combination of these.

If one gives up the language of reification that makes the entity called the Times pick up the persons to suit its ideological needs, as sometimes indicated by rhetorical expression, there remain two answers. One is that persons with appropriate ideas (regardless of whether the ideas were there before, or they came into being in the course of the changes heralding the new Times) gravitate to the foci of power and influence by the action of some determinate forces let loose by (or rather, that constitute) the changed Times. The other answer would locate the subjectivity in the persons with the right ideas, who latch on to the right Times, indeed sight them in their incipience and participate in the process of bringing them to fruition, for their own purposes, be they individual or collective, magnanimous or malign.

The two answers are, in truth, inseparable, though whether taken together they add up to the popular materialist dictum that 'Social Being determines Social Consciousness' is a moot question. Indeed, that seemingly illuminating expression, if taken to express an epistemological statement, is merely a tautological restatement of the basic premise of epistemological realism, that Consciousness is nothing other than Consciousness of Being, which means that it cannot but be determined by Being, provided one is careful enough to add the rider that this does not mean any straightforward reflection. Of course, the fundamental reformulation wrought by humanist ontology, which need not be and should not be otherwise inimical to epistemological realism, that Consciousness is not Consciousness of Being but Conscious Being, robs the expression of even the tautological truth. For the same reason, one can no more interpret the expression sociologically, since when both Consciousness and Being are but notional facets of Conscious Being, there can be no Social Consciousness separate from Social Being or one that is determined by it.

One is then left with the two-sided truth expressed by the two artificially separated processes described above. While analysing changed Times and changed ideas, then, one has to concretely analyse the new forces that constitute the material or social (in the sense of social relations rather than human beings) aspect of the changed Times, and the persons with suitable ideas that the forces bring or push into the foci of power. Simultaneously, one also has to analyse the persons with suitable ideas who identify change (mature or incipient), sometimes perhaps not changes at all but only mino possibilities, latch on to them, and ride to positions of power and importanc even as they help bring the changes to fruition in the same movement. In given instance, it may well be that a powerful material force such as th needs of corporate capitalism dominates this two-sided process; equally, a other times, it may well be true that a dynamic group of persons, perhaps but not necessarily, even a definable fraction of a class or some othe sociological grouping, add by using their strong ideas the strength to a incipient material possibility that it may not have had to become the domina reality. Today, in the Third World, the former is perhaps more true, to suc an extent that it appears to lend veracity to even crude materialism, bu there is no reason to believe that it must always be so. It is arguable tha the latter process is a more accurate description of the initial phase of lef leaning or at least welfare-leaning policies of most Third World countrie notwithstanding that this difference has been rendered obscure b reductionist analysis. But that discussion is not the present subject.

A conclusion about future prospects that one may draw from the considerations is that from a humanist perspective, there is no such thi as a stable, sure, socialist phase of history, or a post-history of humankin distinguishable in its eternally reproduced ethos of cooperation and shari from a prehistory of mutual predation as Marx imagined in his mo extravagant moods. There will always be the possibility of evil surfaci strongly, taken along and magnified into the dominant social reality by determined bunch of persons, or a whole identifiable social catego aggrieved for whatever reason or motivated by a desire for social destructive choices dressed up in some grand rhetoric, for we human bein can never be 'meanly mean', we must be 'grandly mean'. The fact that choose, and that we may choose evil as well as good, is the fundamen human reality, in whose modification the only thing that works is the hum moral sense, not an eternal moral code interior to the species, but mo potential. The latter takes concrete form in and through the curr civilisational morality that is embodied in the institutions and norms, structure and the values, of the particular civilisation, which define, ena and limit it. Eternal vigilance, it appears, is the price of not only liberty socialism as well; not vigilance against an external enemy about wh socialist-minded people need not be told afresh, for we have worked it i a paranoid trait, at least since Bolshevik times, but about the hum potential for evil within.

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Chandrababu Naidu, the much lionised chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, was very much around before the World Bank took over the Indian economy. He was known to be an unprincipled political manipulator, otherwise described as an able party manager. His shifty eyes—described with accurately defamatory imagination, and subsequently retracted for that reason, as the looks of a thief at a cattle fair by his erstwhile colleague in the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), member of parliament Renuka Choudhary—put off most people, but his talent at the kind of politics he chose was recognised and respected by those who respect such things. The fact that corporate capitalism would at most recognise a country cousin in his cut-throat ruthlessness and ability to cohabit easily with falsehood would perhaps have been conceded by an observer of those days, if at all such an observer thought of corporate capitalism in connection with such an unlikely creature as Babu, as Chandrababu Naidu is fondly known to people who are fond of him, or who wish to convey that impression. But a country cousin is only a country cousin, and nobody in those days would have dreamt that he would become a blue-eyed boy of corporate capitalism one day.

His capacity to amass property at remarkable speed, otherwise described as entrepreneurial ability or business acumen, was also known, and again respected by those who respect such things. He was, after all, born to a father who had but four acres of rain-fed land in a part of Rayalaseema, where much of the land is rain-fed, that is, when there is rain at all to feed it, but according to his own recent 'declaration of assets', he owns property worth Rs 4 crore now. One is at liberty to multiply that figure by whatever factor appeals to one's imagination, for he is no stickler for facts. Indeed, it has been a favourite pastime of Congressmen over here ever since he made the declaration to guess at the right factor, and they have been coming up with a new number each day, more for their amusement than anybody's edification. But even Rs 4 crore from four acres of dry land in a not particularly fertile region—and that too shared among brothers—is an achievement that tells quite a lot about the man and his scruples. Yet nobody dreamt in those days that he would be talked about in the business capitals of the world, as we are told is happening now though that perhaps merely shows that, influenced by the smooth and suave face of corporate capitalism, we do not often realise the strong affinity it has to the recognisably repulsive rural buccaneer.

He habitually speaks, whether in the assembly or outside, in the terse and peremptory tones of a village bully, accompanied by the shaking of a threatening forefinger. That could perhaps be put down to unease in speaking English when he is seen on TV by outsiders, but no, it is his manner of speech, which reflects a personality trait formed perhaps quite early in his youth from his upper caste lower middle class background. This meant that he was one among the boys in the village, the school, or the college, not alienated and set apart as a rich one would have been, but one of the boys and a natural leader by virtue of his caste, who was entitled to bully the boys around. It is not that one's background automatically makes one a bully, but it gives the opportunity, and some of those who are given the opportunity choose to become bullies. The same background gives other opportunities too, and some may elect those. Moreover, the opportunity is not presented from outside but is refracted through the particular personality. We are here close to the point where our explanation can no longer be merely social; it must necessarily also be moral and psychic. After a while, all explanation ceases and we can only record, though we can always dig a little more and try to explain a little more.

What human beings make, and what makes human beings are the two sides of the intertwined process of history. The first is observable, even if the authorship is often obscure and frequently contested, but the second can only be inferred or guessed at. All attempts to discover that which, in the first or final analysis, makes human beings, are bound to be futile because at the end it would always be qualified by the statement that firstly what makes me is refracted through the unique thing called 'I', and secondly by the fact that 'I choose'. This applies not merely to external determinants such as production relations or class situations, but even to the subjective determinant of productive human practice, which is frequently set up as an adequate alternative to objective determinism, for it can no more completely explain human choice that belongs as much to the psychic and moral dimensions of human existence as to its practical dimension. A fuller ontology and a fuller anthropology than that of human practice are needed in that case. Radical thinkers appear to baulk here because it would go against the utopian hopes about human possibilities that are the mainstay of radicalism, though a fuller humanism need not militate against all hope of progress, or even substantial progress.

However, one can legitimately talk of influences and impacts that have an effect on not only the choices that we are faced with, and indeed the choices we often create for ourselves, but also on our proclivity to make a particular choice. These influences are perhaps more useful to explain behaviour from hindsight than to predict anything, but even that is helpful for making sense of ourselves.

The totality of social culture embedded in the social structure is undoubtedly the strongest influence, given all the premises of an unabashed

humanism. Chandrababu's father, as mentioned above, was a poor, or let us say, a lower middle class farmer, but he belonged to a dominant caste, the caste of kammas. The caste was powerful in the village and the region, but this family was poor and resourceless. This class–caste category of poor upper castes, especially in a rural setting that imbues it with a tightly knit character held together by unrepentantly medieval assumptions of worth, exhibits certain unpleasant traits all over the country, namely, arrogance and insecurity born of unfulfilled assumptions of eminence, leading to either the bullying type, who is a threat to the lower castes, or the sycophant, who hangs on to the rich of his caste inside and outside the village to bask in the reflected importance, or the ruthless go-getter, who tramples on all in his search for what his caste has promised but his economic status has denied, or some combination of these uniformly uninviting traits. Of course, occasionally, the same milieu has produced leaders of the poor who have put their caste confidence that others lack at the service of the struggle against power, which they know only too closely and are not in awe of. But the undeniable possibility of individual choice apart, any significant tendency in that direction would perhaps require that the social culture contain a tradition defined by the idiom of justice and equality. Chandrababu's native Chittoor district is sadly lacking in such a culture. The region has not been significantly affected by the communist, rationalist and reformist movements that had a salutary influence on the culture of the coastal districts of AP to the northeast, wherein the kamma peasantry participated more vigorously than any other single caste or community. Further, Chittoor, in spite of its contiguity with the Tamil country to the south, also did not partake, to any considerable extent, of the nonbrahmin Self-Respect Movement that had an equally salutary influence in those parts, especially on the upper sudra castes that are comparable to the kammas of the Telugu country.

Forsaken by social progress of either the marxist or the periyarist variety, the most likely type of poor kamma youth from the district was the self-confident but simultaneously insecure seeker of power and property, prone to either physical violence or manipulative ruthlessness, and devoid of any sentiment of sympathy for the poor and the weak. These characteristics emerge for this type of youth has been there and has nothing but contempt for those who remain there, even if they do not have his advantage of caste, indeed precisely because the wretches are so wretched that they do not have the advantage. It is an easily recognisable type, and a type, with all the myriad individual variations not only of actual worth but also emphasis in the angularities and degrees of scruples, that just suits the needs of a very different mode of life—corporate capitalism, which needs just such self-centred and unsentimental types, and the more insecure under the skin the better, for they will then be more ruthless.

However, Chandrababu had still to grow up before he could become the blue-eyed boy of the corporate world. An overgrown country brat would not do. Of course, in the beginning, he was in search of not a place in New York's business magazines, but of only power and money in whichever form and whatever kind he could obtain. Today, he is sometimes described as a computer buff; he is certainly hooked to information technology, to the point of holding the unlikely belief that investment in that area can be the locomotive for the state's growth. But until recently, his life exhibited no such high-tech proclivities. Even if he had been born rich, he would, in all probability, have moved into the lucrative world of civil contracts rather than information technology, and then perhaps moved to politics from there, like the average Indian rural-based politician. As he was born poor, he had neither that option nor this; he could only enter politics.

He cut his teeth in campus politics in the small-town university at Tirupati, in the foothills of Lord Venkateswara, or Balaji as the Marwaris fondly call Him. The university was (and still is) dominated by caste groupings of the dominant communities, overlaid with the proneness to factional violence that is characteristic of some of the hinterland areas of the university, such as Cuddapah district. Physical violence was not Chandrababu's forte. It pays little, and has an uncomfortably terminal character. He preferred to manoeuvre and manipulate from behind the scenes most of the time. The fact that he was a kamma helped him a lot. The kammas of Rayalaseema, unlike their cousins of the central coastal districts, have to contend with an equally strong, but numerically larger and violently inclined caste, the reddys. Yet, being second to none in the nonbrahmin hierarchy, and in their self-perception, more competent in any sphere of life than others, the kammas of Rayalaseema see no reason why they should play second fiddle to the reddys. Therefore, any capable leader from that community would attract a following. Other nonreddy castes would also be inclined to follow such a leader. Both at the university and later outside the campus, Chandrababu used this advantage to the hilt. But he also used the image of an educated young man (he took an MA in economics and apparently dabbled a bit in research of some sort before going on to higher things) as a foil to the old fogeys of the reddy caste, who till then dominated the district's politics.

A dynamic, educated young man to some and a kamma leader to others, he rose fast in the politics of the district. Those among his friends who

went behind him, pulled by the idealism attached to the image of an educated modern young man fighting medieval fogeys, cannot to this day forget the shock they received when they saw him making money from day one after he became MLA. He has never looked back after that. Some politicians are credited with some idealism in the initial years of their careers, which they outgrow in due course and recall nostalgically on inebriated evenings thereafter. Chandrababu has never been accused of any such weakness.

However, it cannot be said that Chandrababu did not have a long-term vision for the kind of society he wanted this country to be. He did, and that is what makes him more than a halfpenny politician. Indeed, we would not be discussing him otherwise. That vision, predictably, was made up of notions of a high growth rate, technological modernity, unsentimental efficiency, and other notions that typically hang together. He was recognisably impatient with anything that was an obstacle to this; in particular, like all persons who hold the arrogant belief that they are 'self-made', as the expression goes, he was impatient with claims of social disadvantage or structural disabilities, and propagated the belief that such people had only themselves to blame, really.

This type of both person and point of view is quite familiar. It is easily attributable to capitalism, though such persons and such points of view exist in all societies, as would be evident if one were not taken in too much by the notion that certain classes of ideas and certain types of personalities are exclusive to certain societies. But the type is, no doubt, found more in societies that are capitalist in their economic structure, for that system of production encourages such a viewpoint, and persons whose personality is permeated with that viewpoint. (The fact that ideas are not held in the mind but through the personality is one of the great truths of psychoanalysis, which makes it an inescapable reality that any epistemological discussion is really an exploration in the anthropology of ideas, and hence also that any theory of history must be humanist if it has to even begin to be true.)

What is interesting about Indian society is the way in which this viewpoint has risen to ascendance in society during the last decade or so. But with hindsight, it appears that this ascendance, as far as AP is concerned, was signified at least in part by the rise of the TDP. Impatience with the emphasis on welfare and concern for the disadvantaged that from the beginning characterised the Indian polity, shaped by the expectations of the social and political churning that we call the freedom struggle, is an attitude that has been hardening over the years in Indian society. The more that the hitherto disadvantaged assert themselves and demand changes in society, policy and the law, the more the resentment grows, and the more the impatience for jettisoning it increases. Much of recent Indian political history can be interpreted within these terms. The theoretical crisis of socialism and the downfall of the states called socialist has further philosophically emboldened this impatience, as much as the fact that the economic policies of yore found it difficult to cross a certain limit of growth.

It is not that there was no space within the Congress party for this impatience; there was plenty. But a certain inertia is inevitable in any organisation as old as the Congress, and moreover there were too many people in that party who had made a political career of representing the disadvantaged. Those who were impatient for change were too impatient to wait. Later in the day, the rise to popularity of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would signify the same change on a larger and much more destructive scale, but as far as AP is concerned, this change began as far back as 1982, with the birth of the TDP. The fact was most clearly represented by *Eenadu*, the daily newspaper that truly represents the ethos of the social sections whose impatience led to the formation of the TDP. Chandrababu, the manager (formally known as general secretary) of the party, after he got over his initial hesitation and joined his father-in-law's party (he was already a Congress minister by the time N.T. Rama Rao set up the TDP) also shared the ethos, though he did not let anyone perceive him as anything other than a (very able) party manager, not even letting people see his political ambition, until he decided to take charge of the party to save it from its founder who, in his estimate, had turned senile. But even at this stage, he did not think that the time was ripe to come out with the no-holds-barred philosophy of glorification of corporate capitalism, and denigration of welfarist responsibilities of the state that characterise the policy dimension of the Indian Constitution as much as popular expectations.

The paradoxical situation of this section of society was that they needed a charismatic leader to represent their interests in power, but wanted the leader to eschew the wasteful and inefficient 'populism', which gave him the charisma, and to be a hard-headed businessman-chief minister, of the type that Chandrababu now proudly declares himself to be. Since such perfection is not attainable by mere human beings, they perforce had to put up with NTR, his populism (or actually his grandiose self-image of a benevolent provider) and all. However, the growing impatience of *Eenadu*, the mouthpiece of this viewpoint, with the antics of NTR, even as it steadfastly supported him against the Congress, quite aptly reflects the tension inherent in this paradox.

It is needless to go into the details of the methods that were used to

resolve this paradox, and the role played in this by matters like NTR's infatuation with his second wife. (It is not clear if one could describe these matters as incidental or contingent, for that may be a hasty and untenable rationalisation of the change.) What played a crucial role in the removal of the inefficient drag on the economy, literally deadwood, which the party founder's egocentric self-image as the grand provider of succour to the masses was by now perceived to have become, not only by the family but also by the crucial support base and international policy prescribers, was the bold decision of Chandrababu to step in as the replacement, to be the Man of the Times. 'The state shall not be the provider but only a facilitator,' says the current ruling dogma. In order to realise itself, the dogma had to await the arrival of a determined facilitator to replace the grand provider. The Times had to wait for the Man—the Man with a personality shaped in an appropriate milieu, imbued with appropriate values to guide his choices, and the right kind of personal scruples or the lack thereof.

That is now in the past. The supporters, the advisers and the prescribers are all vocally delighted with the replacement of the charismatic but unwanted populism of the founder of the party with the hard-headed pragmatism of his son-in-law, who has assumed the electorally risky self-image of an unsentimental corporate executive. The transformation has evoked expressions of an almost childlike glee from the executives of the World Bank and the likes of Bill Gates, and also, one is told, from the business organisations and magazines that belong there. Chandrababu knows this, and never tires of declaring that he is nothing but an efficient manager of the affairs of the state in the manner of a company executive. That is not what the people expect from an elected government in this country, nor what the Constitution says it should be, but then the Times we live in have little respect for such backward notions. What remains to be seen is whether Chandrababu would actually turn out to be the Dupe of the Times, for India, luckily for the people, is still a democracy, whatever its considerable warts may be and you cannot be the Man of the Times unless you get enough votes. There are, of course, numerous ways of managing votes, and Chandrababu knows all of them. He has indeed been a professional in the matter for many years, and is now even aided by computers. But elections still have a way of taking even the most crafty candidates by surprise. It is not that the 'people' exhibit some superior wisdom, as editorial writers invariably say at the end of each election, in the wholesale expiation of everybody's sins, but various dissatisfactions and expectations in society often add up to a sum not bargained for by the most perfidious manager of elections, notwithstanding all the money, the liquor and the physical threats expended during the process.

Chandrababu, however, is not unaware of this. He knows that there is much he has to compensate for in the matter of lost popularity. Various measures such as relaxation of prohibition on Indian Made Foreign Liquor, reduction in the subsidy given to the cheap rice scheme and power supplied to farmers, and a ruthlessly determined closure of a number of loss-making public sector and cooperative sector industries, unmindful of viable proposals of revival, have certainly earned the resentment of a sizeable section of the population. One cannot, however, add up the numbers and debit the votes, because the argument that the schemes meant for the welfare of a few have rendered the economy bankrupt wins by playing upon common human feelings of guilt, and has been used with considerable success by the tireless insistence of governmental spokesmen as well as editorial writers in newspapers. In any case, there is a tendency among the people to see welfare not as the rightful due of those who are rendered disadvantaged by unequal social and economic conditions, but as munificence, transient as all charity. It has been repeatedly said, and dinned into the minds of the beneficiaries, that welfare schemes are concessions given to the unreasonable blackmail of the underprivileged, against the common sense of economic reason. The guilt thus induced is the surest weapon against any opposition to the withdrawal of welfare. But all said and done, the fear of reduced popularity is weighing on Chandrababu's mind. That has set him on the search for a public image that would be pleasing to the voters.

He is consequently indulging in a series of activities and policies to this end that are meant to generate popularity, but are distinguished from the populism that politicians of his father-in-law's generation were accustomed to. It is not just that he needs to restore his popularity after having started the dismantling of welfare schemes. There is a bigger need of the Times involved, and that is what makes it relevant to our purpose—how does the leader in the image of a corporate executive establish a hold on popular imagination? In order to abide by the framework set by the dogma that the 'state should be a facilitator and not a provider', and at the same time, overcome the handicap of invisibility that a mere facilitator would suffer from, which could be fatal in the electoral arena, Chandrababu has proposed the model of an activist facilitator. It is described as taking governance to the people, but it is more of taking himself, or rather his image, to the people. Taking governance to the people can only mean greater

decentralisation of governance, but what Chandrababu is doing is, in a sense greater centralisation, for his brand of administrative activism concentrates the image of governance in one person—himself. If taking governance to the people is what he actually wanted, the least he could have done is to give honest expression to the spirit of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. But his programmes, on the contrary, barring only the water users' associations set up by statute and empowered to participate in the management of local irrigation systems, sidestep the local bodies completely and set up the chief minister and his party at the centre.

His partymen are also making a lot of money in the process, because Chandrababu's activist governance has involved giving rural works contracts under the Janmabhoomi programme on an informal basis on the plea of encouraging the 'people' to undertake their own development. However, while Congressmen are crying hoarse about this because it affects their own moneymaking opportunities, what is more significant about the exercise is the search that Chandrababu is making for a vote-gathering replacement, suitable to the changed Times, for that much derided thing called 'populism'. That may come in use to Congressmen, too, in the days to come.

There is nothing per se wrong in the government's efforts to encourage self-help. If the chief minister wishes to go around encouraging the people to clean their streets and repair the damaged compound wall of the gram panchayat office or village school, while himself holding a helpful broom or spade till the TV cameras leave; or if, as in the case of the Janmabhoomi programme, villagers are encouraged to pool resources for local works to the tune of 50 per cent of the cost in the case of small works, and 30 per cent in the case of big works, with the government undertaking to supply the remainder; there is no reason to carp about these actions merely because they may make Chandrababu more popular, or merely because in some places, in the guise of the people's contribution, some local TDP contractor may come forward, put up the people's share and make a neat profit in the whole process. The criticism levied by all the political formations in the state, from the Congress to the extreme left, that all this is a popularity gimmick, is besides the point. Being in politics, Chandrababu wants to be popular, like all of them. As long as he does not do positively harmful things for becoming popular, such as pulling down other people's places of worship, there is no point is carping about the desire for popularity as such. A truer criticism would be that these activities are actually resulting in greater centralisation of governance; and a truer warning to the people would be that these activities are intended as a substitute for the welfare responsibilities of the state, which are being gradually given up as a matter of policy. It is not that whatever benefit or use the people derive from Chandrababu's schemes is necessarily illusory or only beneficial to the rich. That is not the case. Instead what is actually the case is that welfare, however meagre it may be, has always meant at least a minimal redistribution of resources. Facilitation, even the activist facilitation of Chandrababu, on the other hand, signifies help rendered on the basis of the existing distribution of resources whose inviolability is the holy cow of today's ruling development philosophy. Since the welfare structure has not yet been totally disbanded, this distinction is not yet apparent, but it will soon be. It is not the case that such facilitation on the basis of existing distribution of resources benefits only the well-to-do, and therefore, such facilitation need not at all be uniformly unpopular. Nevertheless, there is a qualitative difference in the change of emphasis from welfare as some minimal redistribution of resources to facilitation as help given on the basis of whatever resources you have.

For instance, if there are irrigation sources in your village and you are a user (not necessarily a big user), you can participate in their management through the water users' association, but if you have no irrigation water available for your use and you wish to sink a borewell to turn your dry strip into wet land, but are too poor to pay the electricity charges at full cost and, therefore, expect the government to supply electricity cheap, then the answer you get is 'nothing doing'. It is true that during the last few decades, irrigation in AP has grown mainly because of well water expansion aided by cheap power, and that this has given two square meals a day and perhaps a little more to lakhs of lower middle class farming families in the Telangana and Rayalaseema regions (precisely the kind of family that Chandrababu's used to be about four or even three decades ago). However, simultaneously, it is also true that not only would the new power policy of the user paying all put an abrupt end to this expansion, but there may in fact be a retardation, with wet lands going dry because many present users cannot afford to pay the full charges, but this is evidently not a matter of concern to the prescribers of policy. This is not an argument for endless supply of very cheap power to all rural users. There could be a gradation of prices. But a general philosophical assumption that the available resources would be efficiently utilised only when the user pays the cost is a different thing altogether.

Notwithstanding the difference, Chandrababu is gambling on whatever popularity the facilitative activism is likely to bring him. Another gambit he is boldly trying out is to contrast the proverbial inertia of civil servants

with his own seeming dynamism in hopping from village to village and town to town, inspecting the dusty insides of dilapidated revenue record rooms or testing the strength of a tank bund that probably last saw repair before the sun set on the British empire. This gambit has made him unpopular with civil servants, but quite popular with the people, as most of his programmes entail that the officials visit villages in the company of MLAs and ministers, and hold themselves open to complaints and questions from the people in the censorious presence of the legislators who successfully act as if they are in no way responsible for the state of affairs. This is one sure way of becoming popular in a country like India wherein the average civil servant is rarely available even for supplication, let alone complaint or criticism. This is perhaps one thing that Chandrababu has learnt from his father-in-law, who put to the best populist use the resentment that common people have for the officialdom. He managed to make people forget that politicians are as responsible as civil servants for the kind of civil service we have in the country. And the son-in-law has taken the cue quite well.

There is palpable tension in the incongruity between the present Times as defined by the World Bank and other policy prescribers for the Third World, and the expectations of social and economic democracy buttressed by the possibilities afforded by political democracy in India. The likes of the crafty Chandrababu, of whom there are quite a few in Indian politics and public life, are seeking ways of overcoming the tension to secure an advantage in favour of their viewpoint. Will they succeed, and if so, on what terms, with what sort of a redefinition of democracy? If not, which of the two mutually incongruous terms would prevail to what extent, or what kind of a cancerous body politic would be left behind? These are questions for the immediate future, not questions for contemplation, but for positive action.

A Tough Law for Other People's Crime

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Hindu mythology is replete with tales of demons with instantly and indefinitely resuscitative heads, with Ravana being the most numerously endowed of them. Chop them as energetically as you will, they are back again ere your sword is sheathed. The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA)[1] is one such modern demon. It is perhaps in the fitness of the perverse logic of our times that its latest clone, an act for the control of organised crime syndicates or gangs, was passed by the Andhra Pradesh legislative assembly almost on the eve of Ramanavami, the festival which purportedly celebrates the final vanquishing of Ravana's cephalic plenitude.

For Chandrababu Naidu, however, the demon is not his legislation but the organised crime syndicates, which he is determined to vanquish so that the state may become a more attractive place for prospective investors. After all, he is looking for upwards of Rs 30,000 crore of capital to flow into this state in the next twenty years to realise his vision of a golden Andhra Pradesh, and he believes that an atmosphere free of gun-wielding extortionists and *gutka*-chewing dons is a must for that.

[1] An extremely harsh, undemocratic and unpopular legislation that was enacted by parliament in 1985. It was allowed to lapse in 1995 following widespread allegations of abuse.

As with all such demonology, a closer look at its terms and instruments raises the following uncomfortable questions: Who is the demon? Who is the vanquisher? Who is the Evil One? And who is protecting the world from that Evil One? It may not always be the case that the myth is susceptible to straightforward subversion, namely, that the demon is, in fact, the virtuous one and the putative saviour the Evil One; but quite often, it turns out that the real relation between the two is something different from what is said, and the real significance of the instruments of the war lies somewhere else.

Organised Crime Syndicates

Let us, for instance, take a look at the organised crime syndicates of AP. The expression is self-explanatory, and the law (Andhra Pradesh Control of Organised Crime Act, 2001) merely puts in specific numbers: if two or more persons use violence or the threat of violence or other unlawful means again and again for their benefit or undue advantage, then they are called an organised crime syndicate. The term 'again and again' is given concrete content by saying that the second time their offence is taken cognisance of by a court, they become an organised crime syndicate, and enter the purview of the new law.

For instance, the Rayalaseema districts have long been notorious for their armed rural factions led by (mostly) reddy landlords/village headmen. The phenomenon goes back to earliest living memory and beyond, but after independence, it has gradually extended beyond the village frontiers and has invaded electoral politics, development works contracts, real estate and finance deals. All these issues symbolising modernity, development and democracy are mediated by the armed might of these village factions that have grown into quite modern mafias, whose style of operation still has a rural ambience, an earthy smell. Chandrababu's government has made much of the ill-effect this violence has had—or is likely to have—on developmental efforts, and this seemingly genuine concern is one of the reasons proffered for the new legislation.

For instance, Larsen & Toubro (L&T) had a bad time with the cement factory it set up near Tadipatri in Anantapur district a couple of years ago. It almost decided to give up and go away, unable to cope with the heavy-handed demands made on it for allotment of civil works, not to mention plain extortion. Gangs led or supported by local factionists (as the leaders of these armed gangs have been known since British times) would drive up to the local manager's office in jeeps or tractors, and demand, under the threat of having the office wrecked if the demand were not met, that the work of laying a road connecting the factory with the nearest highway, or a link railway track connecting it to the Chennai–Mumbai main line, or even the work of building a compound wall, should be allotted to them at the price acceptable to them, and that there should be no talk of quality control, if you please. L&T must be familiar with the urban mafias of Mumbai and Gujarat, but it appears to have found the unpredictability of the numerous rural gangs of Anantapur a bit too much. As the factory is located at the limestone-rich trijunction of the three main Rayalaseema districts of Anantapur, Kurnool and Cuddapah, the rulers of the state were understandably apprehensive that the travails of L&T would hit the development prospects of that mineral-rich region hard. A good enough reason for a law to control organised crime syndicates?

But who or which were the main gangs that gave a rough time to L&T at Tadipatri? The major tormentor and the main beneficiary of the arm-twisting methods of making quick money at L&T's expense was Paritala Ravindra, a Telugu Desam Party (TDP) legislator from Penukonda in Anantapur district. Among the sundry other operators, the most feared were local toughs from the village of Gundlasingavaram in neighbouring Kurnool district, functioning under the umbrella of the late Bejjam Satyam Reddy (who was alive at that time but who has recently been dispatched to his heavenly abode with the aid of a couple of explosives used by his Congress opponents), who was a leader of the TDP from its inception till his death. His son Parthasarathi Reddy is now the TDP legislator from Panyam in Kurnool district.

Who Controls Whom?

Who, therefore, is trying to control whom?

This is not an isolated instance. Paritala Ravindra is, without doubt, the most feared person in Anantapur district. You have only to walk up to any business place in the district and mention his name and demand money, and ninety-nine times out of hundred, you will get it. He is today a TDP legislator and was even a minister for a short while, but much of the fear that his name evokes is because, unusually for a factionist, he enjoys the support of an underground group that calls itself a naxalite party. Once upon a time, he was close to the CPI(ML) (People's War Group), and as he drew away from that party and grew into a TDP leader, a section of that party too broke away and now functions as his 'underground' wing, armed with automatic weapons, landmines, and all. Chandrababu Naidu benefits politically from having such fearsome leaders and legislators in his party, notwithstanding the anguished noises he periodically makes about organised crime and its deleterious effect on development.

The neighbouring district of Kurnool offers an even worse instance of this hypocrisy. Both the MPs from the district (and both of them are from the TDP) and the majority of the MLAs are either themselves factionists, or they belong to the families of factionists. One of them, K.E. Prabhakar, who belongs to the faction that has been instrumental in wrecking peace and democracy in the western talukas of Kurnool in its tug of war with the Congress leader Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, is minister for minor irrigation in the state cabinet. The MP from Nandyal, Bhuma Nagi Reddy, runs a reign of unbelievable terror in his native taluka of Allagadda, where his wife is the MLA. His father-in-law S.V. Subba Reddy is the MLA from Pathikonda in the same district, and was until recently a minister in the state cabinet. The anxiety expressed by Chandrababu about the political and social destruction wrought by these factionists does not extend to refusing tickets to these worthies, come election time. He says he is helpless because if he avoids them, the Congress would patronise them, but the truth is that both the parties have decided that patronising violent political gangs is the shortest road to electoral success. That way, you don't have to go around promising people a borewell here, a road there, and a primary health centre (PHC) elsewhere to get votes. In fact, you need to do nothing at all for the people to get votes. If you have given your party's ticket to a candidate belonging to or supported by a sufficiently well-provisioned gang, the people who vote at their peril would know better than to vote for anyone else.

The TDP and the Congress, therefore, have no intention of severing their links with these 'organised crime syndicates', as a consequence of which the police are loath to touch these gangs. And then, of course, the leaders and the police can get together and blame the criminal justice system for being too lax, and speak wistfully of good old TADA, which they miss so much. Is it possible to believe that they wish to use the new law against these gangs, whom they protected assiduously from coming to harm under the old law? Or is the nostalgia for TADA indicative of a general wish for a law with 'teeth', as against the 'toothless' laws handed down to us by the British? And who would then be the loser?

Not Without Official Patronage?

Let us go on to other organised crime syndicates. Bootlegging (AP is a dry state for country liquor), land-grabbing, extortion, and drug peddling are the other crimes frequently referred to by Chandrababu Naidu in defence of a draconian legislation to curb organised crime. Without going into examples—for instance that Chandrababu Naidu's own brother Ramamurthy Naidu is widely accused of being an ace bootlegger of the district of Chittoor, which has an extensive border with Tamil Nadu—it can be said that such crimes cannot be committed without some degree of official patronage. They are too profitable for the political class to keep away from them. Theft and murder you can commit on your own, but not bootlegging, which requires facilities for manufacturing liquor, storing it, transporting it and vending it. The same is true of tending poppy and marijuana fields, collecting the crop and transporting it, whether it is processed or unprocessed. Land that is grabbed cannot be rolled up, put under the arm and taken away to be hidden somewhere. It must be protected from not only other encroachers but also the law, and built up with the necessary permissions and sanctions to yield the full benefit. No one who is innocent of political connections and patronage of the right kind can get into such crimes.

Nevertheless, these activities are immensely profitable. Perhaps there are better societies whose political elite would neither stoop to such activities nor allow the perpetrators of these offences into its ranks, but the India that we know is not one such society. Our political class is closely intertwined with these 'organised crime syndicates', and the TDP of Chandrababu Naidu is no more an exception than the Congress or the BJP, irrespective of whatever his umpteen admirers among the globalisation crowd may think.

The relevance of all this is not merely to point to the hypocrisy that would not cut off links with this species of crime but would use it as an excuse for a harsh law, but also to raise the question regarding the reasons for the alleged inadequacy of the normal law to deal with such organised crime. Given the political and administrative will to use the law as effectively as its terms permit against these syndicates, the law would succeed at least as much against them as it does against plebeian dacoit gangs, whose members mostly belong to the most despised communities of Hindu society, and enjoy no protection or patronage of any sort, or even sympathy within the courts of law. If the terms do not permit more 'effective' action, then that is the price that civilised social existence pays for being civilised, namely, that even the most hardened criminal suspect must get a fair trial, a salutary value that persons of Chandrababu's ilk who measure civilisation exclusively in terms of the opportunities it provides for enrichment, are wont to describe as the 'laxity' of the law.

Where that will is lacking, such that policemen who are in the full know of things will not even register an FIR, there is no point in blaming the law. The legislature of AP is frequently witness to seemingly high-minded debates on the criminalisation of politics and the links between politics and various types of mafias. The honourable members are cautious not to go beyond a

point in citing names or quoting facts, for all of them live in glass houses. For those viewers of the debate on television channels who know the history of the righteous-sounding participants in the debate, the whole thing is bound to look ridiculous beyond tolerance. In fact, only two things are needed to put an end to the really harmful categories of 'crime syndicates'. The first is that the political class should take a vow to keep away from the gangs and never to patronise them in any way, but this is one thing that our political bosses will never do. Condemnation of the legal principles of natural justice and fairness in action as 'laxity' lies ill in such hypocritical mouths. The second is that the people at large should understand that by taking recourse to the 'services' of these gangs, as people quite frequently do, for getting done summarily what would otherwise take a long time, or for settling their petty scores without consideration of justice and fairness, a weakness that is sometimes ineluctable, often even wanton, in the given circumstances, they are abetting a cancerous growth that is not only harmful in itself but also helps justify harsh methods of governance. Of course, here one is referring only to those 'crime syndicates' that fall within the terms of the new law that are in effect harmful to society, and not all that may come under the purview of those very elastic terms, of which more will be discussed later.

Counter-insurgent Gangs

It is time now to talk of a very recent organised crime syndicate that has come up in AP. It comprises the counter-insurgent gangs of criminalised former naxalites in tow with hardened informers and policemen on the kill. Modelled on the 'renegade' gangs of Kashmir and 'Sulfa'[2] of Assam, these gangs are centred around former naxalite militants, now ready to join the state in hunting down their ex-comrades in addition to all those who are suspected of aiding them. Not all of them are mercenaries, for many of them seem to have their own reasons, good or bad, for hating their former parties. Two of them, Kathula Sammaiah and Jadala Nagaraju, are former underground squad members of the Peoples War Group (PWG) who massacred their fellow squad members and walked over to the police to be received with open arms and cash rewards. The others, such as Md Nayeemuddin, Bayyapu Sammi Reddy, Tirupathi Balanna, etc, joined hands with the police after leaving their parent party in less violent circumstances. They enjoy the patronage of the police and the licence that comes thereof to commit crimes of extortion, intimidation and murder. They thus make a lot of money for themselves by these means.

Kathula Sammaiah has already become one of the most sought after fixers of real estate and finance deals in Hyderabad, as everybody knows that he is a killer with the backing of the police, and a former underground naxalite to boot. Bayyapu Sammi Reddy, to a lesser extent, has slipped into a similar role vis-à-vis civil contracts and contractors in Karimnagar district, where he was a district committee member of the PWG hardly a year ago. The police patronise them with the expectation, if not an explicit understanding, that given their hatred for their former politics they would use the licence given to them to attack the overground friends of the naxalite groups and other democratic activists, and thereby serve as the state's civilian surrogates. They have already struck terror by killing two activists of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), T. Purushotham at Hyderabad on 23 November last year, and Md Azam Ali at Nalgonda on 18 February this year, and by openly declaring a short list of targets that includes the well-known poet Varavara Rao and another APCLC activist and teacher at Osmania University, G. Lakshman. To complete the comparison with the Kashmir renegades, the state actively proposes to take them into the police force. Jadala Nagaraju has already been baptised into the force, and his sizeable gang lives inside the police headquarters at Karimnagar, and is equipped with mobile phones and automatic weapons.

The police department has vehemently denied its connection with these gangs, and puts out contingent explanations about instances to the contrary. But there is reason to believe that efforts in the direction of creating and patronising a 'civilian' vigilante group to be used against the naxalites have been going on in this state for at least fifteen years now. These efforts were successful, though not very effective, for a short while in the first half of the 1990s in Medak district under the aegis of a particularly unscrupulous superintendent of police (SP) there, though the attempt petered out due to various reasons, not least being the physical elimination of the group's members by the PWG. It was also tried with even less success in Nizamabad for a short while during the early 1990s by another SP, who fancied himself as a crusader in khaki, setting the world right in utter disregard of the law. A former dacoit used in this cause was soon killed by the police themselves, apparently because he got too big for his boots.

The fact that the effort could not possibly succeed as easily with the naxalite movement as with the Hizbul Mujahideen and the ULFA is no doubt a consequence of the more deeply political character and the relatively greater integrity of the naxalite movement and its cadre. By the same token,

[2] Short for Surrendered ULFA (United Front for Liberation of Assam).

the fact that the police are now successful is a poor reflection on the present condition of that movement.

The ranks of these degenerate former militants are augmented by informers under threat from the naxalites. They function in close proximity with the police, a fact that is sought to be justified with the explanation that since they are threatened by the naxalites, the police have a duty to ensure their safety. This ostensible 'duty' of the police evidently goes much further, to the point of aiding, abetting or watching silently when these threatened ex-militants and informers take revenge or indulge in attacks in advance upon the naxalites, or even other activists allegedly helping the naxalites. Since they have already committed two murders, they constitute an 'organised crime syndicate' in the language of the new law, but their syndicate is sponsored and patronised by the very same government which has now made a law to control all such syndicates.

The advantage that the police derive from encouraging such private killers is that the killing can be passed off as the private revenge of groups inimical to the naxalites, which adopt the same policy of violence as the naxalites do. Indeed, the fiction is taken quite far by the counter-insurgent gang calling itself CPI(ML) (Green Tigers–Kranthi Sena), so that the police can now say that it is one naxalite group killing sympathisers of another, and what can the hapless police do except to arrest both categories of outlaws and bring them before the law? The lie is given to this pretence by many facts, but the most unambiguous of them is that the person who regularly issues press statements from Warangal, styling himself as Haribhushan, secretary of the group, owning up to the murders committed by them and issuing fresh lists of targets, is in reality one Javed, who was definitely a policeman till a couple of years ago. Whether he is still in the force or has been conveniently discharged with this assignment is not very clear at the moment, but it is not difficult to hazard a guess. It must be added that the indiscriminate killing of lower level police personnel by the PWG has created a situation wherein a sizeable number of policemen of the rank of constables, who have lost their friends, are willing to serve in the counter-insurgent gangs.

In summary, then, it can be said that the state, which has enacted a fresh law to control crime syndicates, is not an innocent victim of such syndicates, nor a beleaguered administration frustrated by mafia gangs beyond its control. It is itself a major patron and protector of a variety of crime syndicates, notwithstanding the air of injured honesty it assumes when asked to explain its latest legislative adventure.

The New Law

Let us then take a look at the terms of the new law, though there is nothing new about it, procedurally speaking, if one has seen TADA. That procedure, evidently, answers minimally to the demand for 'teeth', which is frequently made on behalf of the criminal justice system, and that is why it turns up again and again. Secret trials, custodial confessions rendered admissible in evidence, the near impossibility of getting bail, evidence of witnesses permitted to be recorded anonymously, presumption of guilt drawn in certain circumstances—this is a policeman's charter of unfairness. The fact that all these provisions of TADA are reproduced verbatim in this new law indicates two things—one, that these perversions of fair trial procedure are exactly what all the police-minded critics of our criminal justice system always wanted, terrorism or no terrorism, organised crime or no organised crime; and two, that Chandrababu's administration is too impatient to wait for the rickety coalition in Delhi to pass the renovated TADA, which has been approved by the Law Commission and is awaiting formal enactment. Of course, the state of AP is not alone in this impatience. As TDP leaders repeatedly pointed out in the course of their answer to their Congress critics, it was Maharashtra which first gave itself such an act, followed by Karnataka, and AP is only copying their bills almost verbatim.

It may be argued that since terrorism and organised crime are not entirely identical, this law cannot serve the same purpose as TADA, but it must be remembered that while the stated objects may not be identical, the legal definition has an inbuilt elasticity that would enable either term to be stretched to practically cover the other. Indeed, those who have had the educative experience of conversing with policemen and other proponents of 'tough' legislation know that the term which frequently recurs in such conversation is 'organised crime' and not merely terrorism. It is said again and again that nineteenth-century notions of procedural justice are all right for old-fashioned crime but the recent growth of organised crime needs tougher laws. The term 'organised crime', as used in such discussions, includes but goes beyond terrorism as it is commonly understood. The Law Commission's recent working paper on the new Anti-Terrorism Bill is, in fact, an eloquent though not a particularly ably argued plea in support of this view.

The above argument is not really very convincing. The enactment of 'tough' procedural law in the trial of criminal offences invariably means putting faith in the fairness of the police. It means taking for granted that the police would not, for the sake of a conviction, extract false confessions

on pain of permanent injury; that they would not manufacture a fingerprint to take advantage of the clause of presumption; that they would not slip in false evidence under the cloak of the anonymity permitted to witnesses; and that they would not invent the ingredients of an FIR to bring a person within the purview of the 'tough' law that results in denial of bail till the whole trial is over. All these assumptions are extremely unrealistic in the given culture of policing in India. Unless it is declared that we are no longer particular about the clause that the innocent shall not be punished, and that the accused would be put to no more harassment than is essential for the effective investigation of crime, and perhaps we even believe that the possibility of non-involved persons being convicted or subjected to needless harassment is a salutary deterrent for crime, the very malleable, manageable and corrupt police force of our country should itself be a deterrent to such a line of thought.

A Highly Ideological Force

However, corruption and malleability are not the only factors to be considered here. The police comprise a highly ideological force, a fact that is hidden by their brute power. It is often the police who decide which crimes are truly serious, and which crimes must never go undetected. It is they who decide which criminal deserves no indulgence whatsoever from society. It is they who determine the slant of crime reporting, as the very fact that it is their views of crime that are reported gives us our understanding of crime. This ideological role played by the police is mediated by society's dominant ideology or ideologies, since all institutions of the state are carriers thereof, as much as all 'mainstream' public and private institutions. And so if the power to decide when and how they would misuse their power is put in the hands of the police force, the despised, the powerless and the marginalised would be the direct sufferers.

Ideology is not always a direct or straightforward outgrowth of power, but at least it can be said that it is often congruent with power. Once we recognise that the discretion put in the hands of the police is the most worrisome thing about 'tough' criminal law, we would have to supplement that understanding with the fact that the police as a force are accessible to the powerful, the rich and the socially dominant. 'Tough' criminal law, therefore, becomes a force in the hands of the dominant groups of society.

This is apart from the fact that it is, in principle, objectionable that procedural norms of natural justice are given up for whatever reason. The growth of such principles marks a civilisational advance as much as technological development. It is unpardonable to jettison them because

one Chandrababu thinks they obstruct a 10 per cent rate of growth for the state's economy. I say this knowing fully well that it is more common in radical circles, in which the human rights concern is uncomfortably inscribed, to regard such norms not as a civilisational advance but as hegemonic instruments of legitimation or elements that are integral to modernity's discourse of brute power.

Then there is the more commonly expressed concern of misuse of the law, that is, its use against groups other than the bootleggers, the land-grabbers, the extortionists, the factionists, and the mafia in whose name it is enacted. There is plenty of scope for misuse in this sense—though it may not at all have been not intended—of the provisions of the Act. The naxalites obviously constitute an 'organised crime syndicate', in terms of this Act. As far as they are concerned, TADA is back with full vigour. In addition to the penal provisions pertaining to imprisonment, which are taken straight from TADA, there is the additional and totally new punishment of a huge fine. The Act says nothing about the maximum fine, but for each offence, there is a minimum fine that ranges from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh. The naxalite underground may be able to pay such fines, since they do collect huge amounts by means that may well be politically unexceptionable but are offences under the law of extortion. But their overground sympathisers, writers, printers of their literature, etc, who are all liable to be caught in the web of 'abetment' would find the fine of Rs 5 lakh provided for abetment much more of a deterrent than the imprisonment clause. And regardless of whatever police propaganda may say, not all of them have the kind of relations with the underground which would ensure that the latter pays their fine.

Of course, the provisions concerning the astronomical figures of fine are so poorly drafted that they would probably have to be modified substantially once they come up for judicial scrutiny—I am saying this knowing fully well that our judiciary is more than happy to sail with the executive in the matter of 'tough' criminal law—but that is as yet in the future.

Unsung Victims

However, the naxalites, and other organised political activists habituated to even the slightest militancy—Nanjundaswamy's farmers,[3] who are

[3] Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy (1936–2004) was president of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (Karnataka State Farmers' Association) and an anti-globalisation campaign leader. Nanjundaswamy, who fashioned himself as a scholar-activist, went for higher studies to the Netherlands, discontinued his Ph.D. and returned to his native Mysore to farm his father's land. Inspired by Ram Manohar Lohia, he later became a member of the Samajwadi

addicted to breaking up the furniture of multinational agribusiness companies would fit straight into the definition of an organised crime syndicate in Karnataka—would at least have the sympathy of right-minded sections of the public in the face of this assault by means of an uncivilised statute, but there are some victims whose travails are likely to remain unsung. There is a whole underworld of organised breakers of the law in our country, consisting of people belonging to the most despised communities of Hindu society. The crimes of robbery, dacoity, and small-scale bootlegging are their exclusive preserve. These groups indubitably answer the definition of organised crime syndicates. They enjoy very little sympathy in society, not only among the rich but even the poorer classes, not only because even those who have a little property are understandably concerned about losing it, but also because the castes that these groups belong to are despised by Hindu society, even if not all of them are panchamas[4] in the formal sense. Few tears are shed when their rights, substantive or procedural, are violated inside the police stations, courts and jails. Even existing procedural law with its civilised norms is rarely as civilised as its terms would mandate, when it faces them. Even otherwise 'liberal' judges are never as liberal when trying them. A whole cloud of darkness is likely to descend upon these most unfortunate people. The Muslim youth of the state, especially in Hyderabad and the neighbouring Telangana districts, who appear to be drawing close in increasing numbers to militant Islamic organisations, and who were among the main victims of TADA in the past, may also have to be bracketed with these people.

The question is—how many people are really concerned about all this? There is a perceptible mood of impatience, not only among the rulers but also much of public opinion with all obstacles to the one-dimensional notion of development mandated by globalisation. Scruples that raise questions or doubts about the consequences of this imperative are seen as a drag on development. Although this impatience speaks the language of reason and rationality, much of it is driven by the hunger for power. India is a 'potential giant', and it can be an 'economic superpower', are expressions commonly heard these days. It is small wonder then that this view sits comfortably

Party in Karanataka and was a legislator for some years. In the 1990s he famously protested globalisation by storming and ransacking the offices of the giant seed company Cargill's, wrecking a KFC outlet, burning Monsanto's genetically modified crops and took on KFC, Pepsi, McDonald's and Coca-Cola.

[4] The 'fifth' category, considered untouchable and placed below the four varnas of brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas and sudras. Balagopal is referring here to the denotified 'criminal' tribes.

with the Sangh Parivar,[5] the one political group that has always defined the goals of the nation unambiguously in terms of power. The impatience of this idiom of power with procedural liberality in criminal law is part of its impatience with fiscal liberality in the matter of social welfare. The two fit together and add up to tough-talking modernisers like Chandrababu, who cut down unabashedly on welfare spending and enact draconian laws. The fact that there is also an instrumental or functional connection between the two is perhaps less important than this from the viewpoint of social consent.

Threat to Press Freedom

A final word about the success with which Chandrababu has managed to get those provisions in the bill passed that severely throttle press freedom. In the past, whenever such a bill, containing provisions inimical to the freedom of the press was sought to be enacted, the press rose as one to get those provisions dropped. This time around, however, the press in AP evinced little interest in doing so. Chandrababu is reputed to be the most able 'manager' of press–government relations. If that is not the reason behind this unusual success, then it must be put down to either plain apathy or a collusive self-abnegation on the part of the press.

Consider the provisions of the Act—it says plainly that publication of handouts given by organised crime syndicates, or of news communicated by them, is deemed to be included in the meaning of abetment of their offences. The punishment is a minimum of five years in prison and a minimum fine of Rs 5 lakh. The police alone would hereafter have the right in law to speak about the crime syndicates, and what the police say would be the only truth. Even if the syndicates were all truly criminal in the moral sense of that term, this would be objectionable, for a society needs to understand crime as much as anything else, and as realistically as anything else. Reserving to anyone, in particular the brutal arm of the state, the exclusive right to talk about it would have disastrous consequences. But considering that a sizeable part of the organised crime targeted by the Act is going to be something different, to a slight or large degree, from crime in the moral sense, the appropriation by the police of the exclusive right to speak to the public on it is most objectionable. Yet that is the law as it stands now, and strangely the press has let it pass. Perhaps they are confident that the bigger newspapers would be exempted from this prohibition by the common consent of their proprietors and the chief minister, but that can be of slight consolation to the public.

[5] Refers to the 'family' of organisations spawned by the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

Beyond Media Images

EPW, 12 June 2004

Chandrababu Naidu's defeat is the kind of event that lends itself so well to analysis by hindsight that the effort to indulge in such analysis would actually be too tiresome. In any case, analysts attached to the left parties have done that as ably as hindsight alone permits, and there is no need to add to their wisdom (which does not mean to say that they are altogether wrong). In fact, Naidu (or 'Babu' as he is known to his admirers in the state) is a classic instance of a phenomenon that the West is probably already very familiar with, but we are only just waking up to—a pervasive media creates a celebrity out of almost nothing, and then calls in experts to explain why its creation turned out to be nothing. Chandrababu is merely an ambitious political schemer, who has managed to con quite a lot of intelligent people because he knows that their hunger for the image he has put on—a Third World politician in the mould of a corporate executive spewing IT jargon and the verbiage of the World Bank's development policy prejudices—is too acute to permit the normal functioning of their other senses.

This is an effort, in part, to introduce his successor, for if someone does not do so now, a new myth could soon be in the making, and if the analysts of the left parties participate in its creation, as a homage to coalition politics, one may have to spend a lot of time disabusing the public of it. It is so easy to clothe Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, an MBBS with the image of the good doctor who has turned to politics to cure society, that even without the help of such expertise, the media may itself involuntarily do so. The analogy of 'reforms with a human face', which appears to be the current slogan of the Congress, suits the image so well.

The man is anything but a vendor of humane visages. His rise in politics has been accompanied by more bloodshed than that of any other politician in this state. Not bloodshed for some avowed 'higher cause', but bloodshed for the narrowest possible cause—the rise of one individual to political power and prominence. The recent elections may very well have meant many things in terms of popular aspirations, and one has no desire to be cynical on that score. But in the matter of the change of helmsmen, it has merely replaced a man who would find nothing too crooked if it were to serve his political interest, with one who would find nothing too brutal for fulfilling the same purpose. And for both, the goal is the same—power. Such precisely are the men that neoliberalism wishes to find in power in countries like ours, which it wants to subordinate to its logic and interests. It would be imprudent to regard this as an irrelevant consideration on the ground of the Congress party's avowal of a 'human face', for firstly, that expression has no precise meaning; secondly, Congressmen are known to be capable of changing course midstream; and thirdly, India's rulers, irrespective of the party they belong to, have knowingly put themselves in a position wherein they have little leeway in matters of policy.

YSR (as Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy is known in short) belongs to the Cuddapah district in the Rayalaseema region of the state. His constituency, Pulivendula, exhibits a most distressing topography—endless stretches of nude soil studded with gravel and relieved by rocks that are even more bare than the soil. It is watered, using the expression figuratively, by the Chitravati, a tributary of the Penna (called Pennar in most maps), itself hardly a river worth the name. Today, YSR wishes to be seen as a politician who has responded to the needs of farmers and is determined to do good for them, but in the nearly three decades of his political life, he has not been instrumental in adding even one acre of assured irrigation to the parched lands of the constituency that has again and again returned him or his brother (when YSR chose to go to parliament instead) to the state assembly.

His father Raja Reddy was, to begin with, an ordinary farmer and a small-time civil contractor. He got converted to Christianity during the days when even upper castes thought that there might be material benefit in doing so, and was ostracised by the reddys of his native village, Balapanur. He shifted to Pulivendula, the tahsil headquarters. He quickly made a name for himself as a rough and violent man with whom one had better not get into a quarrel. In order to understand how Raja Reddy took advantage of

that situation and paved the way for his son's rise in politics, one must know something about Rayalaseema.

Viewing Rayalaseema

The Rayalaseema districts of Andhra Pradesh are known for severe water scarcity. Although as a matter of convention, the region is said to comprise the four districts of Anantapur, Cuddapah, Kurnool and Chittoor, in physical, social and historical terms, only the Madanapalle division of Chittoor district can be talked of in the company of the other three districts. The rest of Chittoor is, in every sense, including in terms of its average rainfall precipitation, a distinct entity. The other three districts have an average annual rainfall of 618 mm, which is among the lowest in the country. They lie in the basins of the Tungabhadra and Penna rivers, which popular memory associates with bounteous waters once upon a time, but which are today mere apologies for streams. The catchment of these rivers gives only a moderate yield, much of which has already been dammed, rendering dry the riverbeds along most of the length of the rivers. But the canals from the dams serve only about 4 per cent of the cultivable land in the districts.

The major irrigation source of Rayalaseema, however, used to be the excellent system of tanks constructed by the Rayas of Vijayanagar, from whom the region derives its name. Like the rulers of Hyderabad and Warangal to the north, the Rayas of Vijayanagar got a system of tanks constructed all over the region to husband the scarce water resources and channelise them into the fields. Indeed, most of the kings who ruled the various parts of the Deccan, and not merely the Telugu country, built such tanks to provide water for drinking and irrigation to the populace. A characteristic of the irrigation tanks of Rayalaseema is their huge size, probably because rainfall there is even scarcer, and demands even more comprehensive husbanding of water than elsewhere in the Deccan.

This tank system, as indeed everywhere in the Deccan, is, however, now in a shambles. Almost nothing has been done for its upkeep during the last several decades. Because of the denudation of the land around, even the slightest rainfall causes an inrush of water into the tanks, thereby breaching the poorly maintained bund. The breaches merit only the most cosmetic of repairs, and as a result, the tank bunds are but bundles of ill-repaired breaches. For the same reason, all the tanks are heavily silted, so heavily indeed that they look more like irregular-shaped football fields than irrigation tanks. In the days before the advent of chemical fertilisers, the silt was prized by farmers as a source of fertile topsoil, but now nobody is interested in taking the silt to fertilise their fields, and so desilting, if it has to be done comprehensively, would be akin to a mass waste-removal exercise. As such, it is too costly to be undertaken with the meagre funds that governments are willing to spare for the upkeep of traditional irrigation systems.

The upshot of this state of affairs is the reliance of local farmers on the increasing use of groundwater, through deeper and deeper borewells. But this is a self-destructive game, for the deeper farmers dig wells in competition with each other, the deeper they will have to dig next time around. The scarce rainfall cannot sustain this technology-driven thirst for groundwater. In 2002, in the midst of the second successive year of drought, a middle class farmer in YSR's Cuddapah district had dug a borewell 1,000 feet deep, and still did not find water. ('If only I had persevered a little more, I may have struck oil' was, however, the farmer's only response to commiseration, for a sense of humour rarely forsakes farmers, even in the worst of adversities.)

Violence-prone Society

A harsh physical environment does not necessarily lead to a harsh social life—there is no such homology—but the peculiar history of Rayalaseema, combined with the region's scanty natural endowments, has led to a violence-ridden society. The kingdom of the Rayas was characterised by devolution of the power of administration, more particularly that of 'law and order', down to the lowest level. This was even truer of the border areas, which were administered by men whom the British gazetteers called polegars ('palegadu' in Telugu and 'palayakkaran' in Tamil). They (often) had small forts, and an armed retinue of men, with whose help they maintained order and assisted the collection of revenue. Except during the most well-administered periods of the region's history, these men were not bound by any known rules of conduct, not to speak of anything resembling law. They behaved like, and in fact were, warlords. With the fall of the Vijayanagar empire, most of them became sovereigns over a handful of villages and incessantly raided neighbouring domains for booty and territory. It is said, though there is no hard evidence in this regard, that the villagers caught in this conflict sought refuge with village strongmen, who could gather a retinue behind them and play the role of protector. But of course, when they did so, the villagers had to pay for the protection by living in accordance with the protector's writ.

As the fall of the Vijayanagar empire was followed by conflict between the British Indian rulers, on the one hand, and the rulers of Hyderabad and Mysore, on the other, with most of this conflict taking place over the

Rayalaseema districts, the warlords as well as any of the villagers who could gather an armed group around themselves, carried a double premium—the battling armies wooed them, and the local people too needed their help to protect them against the marauding soldiers from outside the region. At the end, by the time the British brought the entire region into their control by the beginning of the nineteenth century, what was left was this residue of a social practice—men of the dominant sections would gather an armed gang around them to assert their power, enforce their writ in the village, and fight off challengers to their power over society. While the polegars mostly comprised the non-cultivating communities such as boyas and patras, the practice of establishing dominance and exercising power through the force of armed gangs became a characteristic feature of powerful landed communities, generically described as kapu (husbandsman), but mainly members of the reddy caste in recent decades. The British, who successfully put an end to the polegars by implementing a carrot-and-stick policy, found to their dismay that this residue continued to disturb their notion of the rule of law. They christened these gangs 'village factions', a name that continues to be used to this day.

The typical village faction was that of the village headman called reddy in Rayalaseema. That appellation today refers to a dominant caste, which is present all over the state, and men of the caste tag the word 'reddy' behind their names. But that is a phenomenon of recent decades, more particularly the latter three-quarters of the twentieth century. The word has a complex history, one aspect of which is that it designated the village headman in the Rayalaseema districts, in the days when village administration was presided over by the institution of hereditary headmen. This reddy would protect his primacy in the affairs of the village with the most aggressive zealousness. Any challenger to his authority would have to contend with a violent response from him. Although we spoke above of a retinue maintained by such strongmen, it was not a permanent gang maintained only for fighting. Most of the retinue would consist of ordinary farmers or labourers, who would come to the aid of the reddy when called upon to do so. It goes without saying that they would benefit in matters wherein the reddy had the final say, but passionate loyalty among the reddy's followers is a characteristic of village factions. The attachment of these followers was never merely a matter of rational calculation.

The dominance of the reddy would often be challenged by someone in the village. He would invariably be either a big landowner, or an otherwise powerful man, for example, by virtue of his closeness to the ruler of the area. From about the time that the word reddy started signifying a caste

and not just hereditary headmanship, it is seen that in most cases the challenger was also a reddy by caste, though there were important exceptions, especially in areas where the militant boya community was found in large numbers. The challenger would gather a group of villagers behind him and fight the group of the 'reddy'. The people who gathered behind him would include, of course, his kith and kin, his tenants, and sharecroppers; persons who had suffered at the hands of the 'reddy'; and those who had conflicts of interest or ego with the followers of the 'reddy'. They would even include people who were obliged to the challenger for their day-to-day life or livelihood, even those people who, because of the village topography, had to pass by the challenger's house or fields to reach their own houses or fields.

Once such a challenger emerged, or in the course of his emergence, street fights between the two groups would break out at every conceivable instance. The slightest material interest of every member of the group had to be protected or realised by force, and the slightest injury to every ego had to be avenged by force. But everything turned around the primary interest: the leader's pre-eminence in the village, his honour, his writ, his word. For this, lives were sacrificed in a spiral of killings. Every death had to be avenged with a death, every burnt house or haystack with a burnt house or haystack, and every devastated acre of land with a devastated acre. The implements of fighting in the old days were stones, sticks and every other implement made by the human race for taming nature and making it yield fruit. It was after the 1950s that crude explosives, crude firearms, and lately more sophisticated weapons have entered village factions. It is an interesting aside that at each stage, it was the communists who were, in all innocence, responsible for modernising the weaponry of faction fights.

The village factionist of yore, as can be imagined, was hardly an epitome of rationality. By the time he was through with his energies, he would also be through with much of the property he had: it cost a lot to fight court cases, look after injured followers, repair burnt-down dwellings, and replace hacked orchards, all to keep his manly pride and moustaches intact. But after the introduction of panchayati raj democracy and rural development works, the brutality of village factions acquired the sheen of instrumental rationality. The village factionists quickly realised that the methods used by them to protect the elusive social prominence or importance could be put to more practical use for rigging polls and winning panchayat elections at the village or block level, and monopolising road and other public works contracts in the village. This started earnestly in the 1960s.

The next and natural step was for a leader to emerge from among the village factionists of an area or from a town nearby, who would gather the support of all the powerful factionists of the area, create factionists to fight the recalcitrant, assist the faithful in defeating their rivals, protect their crimes, and make it worth their while to indulge in crimes of violence on his account in addition to theirs. He would also make this support from the other factionists the basis of his rise in politics at the district level and beyond, and the guarantee of a monopoly over not small or local public works but substantial civil contracts. It took a new generation of men to spot and realise this possibility. YSR was one of the pioneers of this change, which has terrorised and devastated the social and political life of the Rayalaseema districts.

Communists as Catalysts

The communists played a peculiar catalyst's role in all these developments. The undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) had some base in the Rayalaseema districts. Its leader Eswara Reddy was elected as the MP from Cuddapah on four occasions starting with the first parliament. The CPI fought—or sought to fight—feudal domination in the villages, but had to contend with the culture of village factions. The communists, from that day to this, have unfortunately understood factionalism as merely a rather violent form of feudal domination, which may only require a more violent response, and nothing more. They have never adequately understood the fact that village factions divide all classes in the village vertically, from absentee landlords to the poorest labourers, that this vertical division is accompanied by a degree of felt loyalty to the factionist at the top, thereby reproducing the animosity at the top all the way down the line, and that such a state of affairs is seen as the natural ordering of society by all classes.

Therefore, when the communists found it difficult to organise the masses to fight a feudal landlord, they encouraged and supported any upstart who was willing to challenge the landlord's dominance. All that they achieved was to create a new factionist, who would discard the communists once his purpose was achieved. Pulivendula was dominated in the early years after independence by Devireddy Nagi Reddy (known as D.N. Reddy), a somewhat haughty landlord, mill owner, and an erstwhile zilla parishad chairman and MP. YSR's father Raja Reddy was willing to take on D.N. Reddy, and the CPI assisted him by helping him to win the block-level panchayat elections. Today, the CPI has all but left the district, but Raja Reddy's legacy continues in the form of his powerful son.

Raja Reddy established his credentials as a man to be feared through an incident that people still talk of, nearly fifty years later. The town of Pulivendula has a sizeable colony of erukalas, a Scheduled Tribe (ST), some of whom were known for their unruly ways. They were despised but feared by the higher castes, though it is rumoured that D.N. Reddy was not above using their crimes for his ends. One day one of them, Oosanna, tried to steal the ornaments worn by a woman of the reddy caste in the bazaar. When the woman struggled, that man cleverly exclaimed that she was his wife and was being disobedient. By the time people realised that he was telling a lie, he had slipped away. Later in the day, Raja Reddy reportedly caught hold of Oosanna, dragged him to a public place, poured kerosene on him, and burnt him alive. This incident made Raja Reddy a feared man, and people became willing to gather behind him in his conflicts with established leaders. Gradually, he gained immense dominance in the area. But he lacked money of the kind that would sustain his further rise in politics. This problem was resolved by a combination of chance and brutality just about the time that YSR entered politics. Cuddapah has deposits of the mineral barytes, which was initially not a highly priced mineral. One of the mining leases was held by Venkatasubbaiah of the balija caste. Raja Reddy joined him as a junior partner/supervisor (it is not clear which), reportedly because Venkatasubbaiah believed that he (Raja Reddy) would be useful in controlling the workmen. Around the mid-1970s, however, it was discovered that barytes has use in petroleum refining, and its price shot up. Raja Reddy wanted Venkatasubbaiah to hand over the mining lease to him and leave the area. A prominent CPI leader and writer, Gajjela Malla Reddy, brokered a deal whereby Venkatasubbaiah would take Rs 11 lakh and leave the mining lease to Raja Reddy. Venkatasubbaiah refused, and was killed. Thereafter, the mining lease passed into YSR's hands.

For many years in the latter half of the 1980s and the early half of the 1990s, YSR's baryte mining operation was the subject of one scandal after another. The lease—or sublease, after barytes mining formally became the monopoly of the Mineral Development Corporation, only to be subleased to the same previous lessees—would be signed for a certain extent of the land, but many times more of the surrounding land would actually be mined. Even a piece of land on which stood a monument notified as protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was mined, and 1.5 lakh tonnes of the mineral (priced at Rs 600 per tonne) had been taken away by the time the government woke up and put a stop to it. There was also the case of a villager, Vivekanandam, whose private land of 1.8 acres was subleased to YSR by the corporation. Although that man went to court and obtained an injunction against the sublease, YSR continued with the mining and

took away mineral worth Rs 5 crore. Thereafter, Vivekanandam's maternal uncle, Rajagopal, who was a retired government employee, set out for Hyderabad to express his protest to the then chief minister, Janardhan Reddy, and to move the high court again. On the way, the old man was attacked by a gang in the middle of the state's capital, and had his hands and legs broken. This incident occurred as recently as 1992.

With the money flowing from the barytes mines into his pockets, YSR was in a position to undertake the transformation of 'village factions' into full-fledged instruments of political and economic domination at the highest level. There were others during this period—the post-Emergency breed of educated, intelligent and utterly cynical politicians—who made money from other sources, such as excise contracts, and used that wealth in the same manner as YSR did to rise to prominence in Rayalaseema politics. The money they made was used to buy the support of village factionists. The supporters would help the factionist overcome his rivals and establish unchallenged power over his area of operation. If a factionist were too adamant and did not heed the call, a rival would be funded to rise against him. A lot of lives would, of course, be lost in the process, but then for these gentlemen, that was not a significant matter. Once the leader managed to establish a sufficient monopoly of control over the local factionists, his political–economic future was ensured. Elections would be concluded in his favour, and his muscle power would ensure that he monopolised all the civil/excise contracts that he coveted. This sounds placid when stated in this fashion, but the process involved a tremendous amount of violence and inaugurated a veritable regime of terror in the area.

Manipulation of the Election Process

Political parties and programmes have meant nothing in Rayalaseema, more particularly Cuddapah district. The only distinction in that district has been—with YSR or against YSR. Those who are with him can be in his party or in any other party—not excluding the CPI—and similarly for those who are against him. On more than one occasion, he has exhibited his capacity to ensure that a candidate to the assembly from his own party who has got a ticket against his will is defeated by a candidate of his choice contesting on a TDP ticket. Elections in Rayalaseema have meant open violence on polling day to scare away voters and leave the field open to bogus voting, taking away the ballot box to stuff it with ballot papers stamped elsewhere, preventing voters of the rival candidate from entering the polling station, forcing voters to show the stamped ballot paper to the local factionist's man before putting it in the box, and other such acts.

Until recently, a rule followed by the Election Commission was that in the event of the death of any candidate, the election would be postponed. Killing defenceless candidates to get the poll postponed is a method not unknown in the more violent parts of our country. Rayalaseema is no exception. In the assembly polls of 1989, YSR's follower Nagi Reddy fought the TDP's Palakondarayudu at Raychoti in Cuddapah district. In the parliament polls of 1985, Palakondarayudu, who was then a candidate for parliament, was unsure of the support of the two main local factions that ruled Raychoti town. So he is said to have got an independent candidate, Guvvala Subbarayudu, killed and got the election postponed. He thus gained time to rope in the two factions, and succeeded in winning the election held later.

In 1989, polls were held simultaneously for assembly and parliament. This time, Palakondarayudu was a candidate for the assembly. Apprehensive that he may repeat his victorious performance, YSR's man Nagi Reddy set up a pliant man of their own faction, Avula Subba Reddy, as an independent candidate, and allegedly killed him the day before the election to get the election to the assembly postponed. It is inconceivable that this could have happened without the knowledge and consent of YSR. In the parliament poll that took place that day as scheduled, there was an orgy of violence in which five persons were killed in Raychoti town including a polling officer. The polling officer, Ahmedullah, was dragged out of the polling station and murdered. The Congress candidate was elected to parliament. The terror created by YSR's group on that day was sufficient for his candidate Nagi Reddy to carry the day when the assembly poll for the postponed Raychoti segment was later held.

While establishing themselves in power by such means, these leaders simultaneously set themselves up as representatives of the region who would fight the rulers of the state for justice to water-scarce Rayalaseema. It has been the tragedy of Rayalaseema that, unlike Telangana for instance, which has a vibrant political climate that throws up activists close to the people, the same leaders who have devastated the region's social and political life with their strategies of gang warfare have time and again doubled as saviours of the people. But as their interest is merely the furtherance of their political careers, such espousal is short-lived and fruitless.

For about three to four years during the early part of the 1980s, these leaders led major agitations for securing water for irrigation in the region. They held lengthy padayatras and boisterous protest meetings. YSR was among those in the forefront. But their interest tapered off once they succeeded in putting pressure upon N.T. Rama Rao to sanction the extension

of the Telugu Ganga[1] project to provide irrigation water to parts of Cuddapah district. Later, the Congress came to power in the state, and many of the agitators became ministers, but they did precious little for the irrigation needs that they had agitated for. Subsequently, the TDP came back to power again, but this time YSR took care not to be seen agitating for the rights of one region. He had aimed his sights higher. He would dislodge Chandrababu and become chief minister of the state. Power and power alone has been his guiding light, at each stage of his career, much like Chandrababu. Given the peculiar nature of Rayalaseema society, brute force served YSR's purpose during the initial stages, much as unscrupulous manipulation did in Chandrababu's case. But once he set his sights on Hyderabad, he knew that other methods would have to be tried out, and he has been game for that.

He worked quite systematically towards this end and has succeeded. In the process, he has given the impression of being a man who cares for the classes neglected by Chandrababu's model of development. Whether that is really so is, to put it politely, extremely doubtful. The fact that those classes have reposed trust in the Congress party under his leadership is clear—all analysis as well as impressionistic views point to the issues of irrigation and employment as being central to the defeat of the TDP, augmented by the desire for a separate state in the Telangana region. Economists too agree that poor growth of employment opportunities, and poor capital formation in agriculture, the latter being mainly because of low public investment, are two of the negative characteristics of the Indian economy's performance in recent years. Too categorical an analysis of voters' preferences is a risky business, but it appears reasonable to suppose that the dissatisfaction generated by these factors lies behind the victory of the Congress. YSR realised it in the course of his pre-election padayatra, which brought him face to face with a lot of dissatisfaction regarding issues on which—barring free power to farmers—he had never taken any stand till then. Having got a measive of the dissatisfaction among farmers, he has already gone on record promising heavy investment in major irrigation projects, and free power to farmers, which will encourage private investment to the same end. If he has not issued any immediate policy statements in

[1] Initiated in 1983, the Telugu Ganga projects envisaged reaching the waters of the Krishna river to the city of Chennai via the Rayalaseema region. After several delays, this became fully operational in 2004. Water drawn from the Srisailam reservoir is diverted through a series of inter-linked canals, over a distance of about 406 km, before it reaches its destination, the Poondi reservoir near Chennai.

the matter of employment, that is understandable because it is by no means an easy matter. And as for Telangana, YSR has made no secret of the fact that he has neither any understanding of nor sympathy for that cause.

However, it is doubtful that he has any real convictions in regard to the first two issues either, other than the realisation that they have been useful instruments in his ascension to power. If freedom to all prisoners were to serve that purpose, he would equally readily have emptied all the state's jails, without holding any philosophy of punishment commensurate with the act. These may appear to be points that are not worth lengthy discussion, and it may even be cleverly said, as the Hindi saying goes, that we are concerned that the fruit should be a mango, and not that the tree should be a mango tree. But if correcting economic policy distortions is what the aspirations of the people are, as has been revealed by the elections, we must note that a change in the irrigation policy from Chandrababu's exclusive espousal of drip irrigation to a more realistic programme is not sufficient by itself. Such a change is not by itself inimical to the ruling policies being prescribed in the name of reforms. The whole gamut of the policies concerning resources, opportunities and governmental responsibilities would have to be addressed, even if they have not been issues on the voters' minds while voting to bring YSR to power. There is little evidence that YSR is committed to a different view on these matters than Chandrababu's, or that he is willing to devise ways of standing up to the pressure that the World Bank and other instrumentalities of neoliberalism have been exerting in these matters. Much of what he is now heard saying against Chandrababu's brand of neoliberal economic philosophy, was picked up by him in the run-up to the elections, and was never part of his way of looking at the economy.

It should also be noted that the forces distorting India's economy to serve a variety of external interests inimical to those of the poor and needy have not been content with prescribing any transparent economic policy imperatives at all to suit their ends. They have indulged in a number of devious measures behind the backs of the people, with the active connivance of the rulers. Chandrababu was a willing collaborator in this, and YSR is not proof against it. The economic philosophy ruling the world, namely, that resources, opportunities and governmental assistance of all kinds are optimally distributed when they are put unreservedly at the service of those who can augment them with the most investment and generate from them the most income, is easily understood when it is plainly stated. It is also easily opposed if one has the slightest conviction that progress should be everybody's progress, not occurring at some unspecified date in the future,

but with reasonable immediacy. But that policy prescription has not been content with such transparent debates. It has sought to work itself into our polity by opaque devices and has succeeded wherever it has found local collaborators among those in power. Those who believe that YSR will resist where Chandrababu was willing are merely fooling themselves.

V

Theorising Caste

A Year of Drought?

EPW, 18 September 1993

The southwest monsoon is all set to depart from the skies of Andhra Pradesh. Having played truant for the first six weeks and been wilful for the next six, it is finally ready to clear out from the state, leaving the people in their respective regions and localities to estimate how much of a drought they are going to face during the coming year. It is no longer a novel thing to say that the official pronouncement of normality or subnormality of the total seasonal rainfall in each of the districts is a largely meaningless exercise; and that the amount of rainfall has to be discussed in conjunction with what has happened or been done to the storage and retention mechanisms, processes and facilities to arrive at a meaningful framework for discussing drought. What needs to be stressed anew and described in gory detail again and again is that these have been destroyed, neglected, mismanaged or developed in a skewed way over the years, thereby creating perpetual drought conditions of differing extents in various pockets, regardless of whether the total precipitation of rain is normal or not. It is when rainfall drops below the normal level that the neglect and the one-sided development of water retention and storage processes is exposed sharply and is dubbed as drought, thereby being attributed to the meanness of the monsoon.

It is true that the government these days attributes the shortfall in rain to the destruction of forests and is paying considerable attention to growing more forests, an attention that is likely to increase with the growing

conservationist pressure that international bodies are exerting on tropical countries to save their forests. Our government understandably objects to this one-sided concern about conservation in the Third World—a one-sidedness that affects all concerns from atomic weapons to forests—which has virtually robbed of all meaning the word 'international' appended to the names of many world bodies. However, this conservation is a good thing as far as it goes, even if the emphasis on afforestation as the exclusive cure for all droughts is robbing landless poor of land that they have been occupying for years and even decades. Indeed, afforestation is spoken of in such hallowed tones by officials that the poor are left feeling guilty for even asserting their right to the land they are banished from. However, the destruction of forests is about all that pertains to 'our sins' in causing drought. The lack of effective policies and implementation of wrong policies concerning the retention, storage and use of water is not held responsible for the problem of drought in the way that deforestation is. Evidently, any such acknowledgement would amount to disturbing too many well-protected interests, many more than the afforestation of land occupied by the poor would.

By the third week of July this year, there was so little rain in AP that the situation was frightening. Eighteen of the twenty-three districts in the state had received much less than normal rain, in many cases as little as 15 to 20 per cent of the normal. For instance, Pargi taluka of Ranga Reddy district, which has a normal precipitation of 1,600 mm by end-July, had received only 330 mm by the end of the third week of July.

The worried government officially commissioned pujas and higher vedic rites to placate Varuna, the rain god. The Ministry of Religious Endowments—which is presumably closest to the gods—was chosen to commission the rites and ensure that they were executed. However, in keeping with the present emphasis on private effort, ministers advised people not to depend for everything on the government but to perform pujas on their own. There is no dearth of brahmins in the country anyway. Simultaneously, however, the government prudently undertook cloud-seeding experiments at chosen localities to use secular efforts to cajole the clouds into unburdening themselves of the water they were ostensibly carrying. And to confound things further, there was a low pressure simultaneously in the Bay of Bengal, which usually augurs rain on the eastern coast. It requires statistical analysis of the kind that has not yet been invented to decide which of these causes resulted in the tangible effect, but some effect did ultimately result. Meteorologists of Andhra University rebuked the cloud-seeding experts, who had come from Gujarat, for prematurely patting themselves on the back, and there was some polemical discussion about the relative merits of ground-seeding and aerial-seeding of clouds. Rationalists of various kinds criticised the government for wasting money on *kratus*[1] while it was evident that the rains came because of the low pressure in the Bay of Bengal. The brahmins did not deign to join the debate—they got their fees anyway—but no doubt, the god Varuna, being a cautious fellow, prefers to work his boon through facts of nature such as a low pressure in the Bay of Bengal, for He would be setting a wrong precedent if He allowed empty skies to rain. Anyway, there was some rain—heavy in a few places where cloud-seeding had been done—for a couple of weeks, thereby improving the one statistic that the government is interested in: the total precipitation of rain by the end of the season. The figure climbed closer to normal in the deficit districts. At one point, the government even became bold enough to say that there was a deficit of rain in only ten districts of the state, but at the end it acknowledged that fifteen of the originally eighteen deficit districts faced a shortfall of rain, though the deficit was much less at end-August than at end-July. And that was that.

However, the people are only concerned with whether the amount of rainfall that has occurred has served their purpose, and if not, why? This for them is the real meaning of drought. And this is linked to not just the total seasonal rainfall, but to the pattern of rainfall, retention of moisture in the soil, groundwater recharge and availability at cost-wise accessible levels, state of repair of the irrigation tanks, siltage of tanks and project reservoirs, destruction of catchments, sand-quarrying in the streams that feed the irrigation tanks, and so on, right up to the crop loan policy of the rural banks. In the perpetually drought-prone taluka of Devarakonda in Nalgonda district, for instance, it rained hard and briefly once at the beginning of the monsoon, and then once again a month later. Each time, the less prudent of the farmers hoped for further rain and sowed seeds—castor, jowar and bajra, which are, in that order, the principal crops of Devarakonda. The more prudent among the farmers were wiser, for there was no further rain, and the moisture in the soil was not sufficient to allow the sown seed to sprout and live. Many of them had to sow a third time at the end of July when it rained again. But the repeated demand for seed had, in the meantime, pushed up the market price of seed by 50 to 100 per cent, while the banks were not giving crop loans. The rural banks and the farmers' cooperative societies—both of them meant specifically to provide crop-related loans to farmers—bluntly refused to give loans to those who had defaulted in

[1] Religious function performed on a large scale.

repayments last season, which meant most of the poor and middle farmers, as last season had also been a drought season in Devarakonda.

The point being raised here is that such scattered and insufficient rain is not at all a rarity in places like Devarakonda. To the extent that the problem is natural, one can talk—as politicians incessantly do so—of bringing the waters of the Krishna river to Devarakonda through old or new irrigation projects. But irrespective of howsoever many such projects that may be built, a large part of Indian agriculture—especially in regions such as Rayalaseema and Telangana—is going to be principally rain-fed for a long time to come. And what is not rain-fed would depend upon wells and irrigation tanks that too are fed by local rainfall unlike canals of river projects, which may be fed by rains in far-off catchments. This is why measures to conserve rainfall—in the soil, under the soil and in the tanks—are of primary importance because the sufficiency or insufficiency of rainfall depends on these measures. It cannot be said that the government is unaware of this, as at least soil conservation and groundwater augmentation have been part of its avowed objectives for a long time, but the sense of urgency that pervades talk about projects on rivers among government officials is entirely absent here. The former is a resounding element in the incessant din of Indian politics, whereas the latter is never a part of political polemics or disputes, not to mention hunger strikes such as those of Jayalalitha's.[2]

It can be fairly said that despite all the talk of expenditure on soil conservation, minor irrigation and groundwater augmentation, effectively the only irrigation policy that the government of India has is to construct dams across rivers and improve the statistics of irrigated acreage by spectacular jumps whenever it can get the World Bank or somebody else to loan enough money for such projects. Otherwise the government leaves it to individual cultivators to extend irrigation in their private fields by private effort through well irrigation. To aid this effort, the government provides diesel and electricity for pumpsets, often at a subsidised price. And during the last two decades, bore well technology for deeper exploitation of groundwater is being extensively encouraged through the disbursement of loans both to the farmers and the borewell companies. Evidently, those who cannot raise enough resources are outside the framework of this effort at extending well irrigation. Mere tinkering with improvement of rain-fed lands, wanton destruction of irrigation tanks, and neglect of evident opportunities for minor irrigation works—opportunities that abound especially in the hilly and undulating terrain of Telangana—that can facilitate both the storage of rainwater in tanks and the augmentation of groundwater, are a corollary to this skewed policy. All this becomes starkly evident and is called 'drought' when the rains fail.

The rural rich who control provincial politics in India are not unaware of this—indeed even the least literate of the cultivators in the drought-hit areas are fully aware of all this—and yet the leaders make little noise about it. The scientistic ideology of admiration for the kind of dramatic statistics associated with big projects—five lakh acres to be brought under water at a stretch, and so on—may be partly blamed for blunting awareness among both the leaders and the followers. And depending on one's theoretical proclivities, one can then go on to blame science—bourgeois male/occidental/white—for causing drought. But ideology is only partly the culprit. The provincial political elite prefer solutions that entail dramatic results instead of less spectacular measures that add up bit by bit over time and geographical space for a variety of reasons. Their political time-frame is short, often less than five years, and their political idiom is structured accordingly. When water for five lakh acres of land is being promised or demanded, no mention need be made of which five lakh acres would be watered and when, and one can even claim that the whole of one's political constituency would be flooded with irrigation water in a short while, if only the government—or the opposition, or the World Bank—were not so cantankerous. That kind of grandeur is just not possible with soil conservation. And while canals bring only benefits (or so it seems), soil conservation, tank maintenance and groundwater augmentation require some sacrifice, especially on the part of the rural elite that is misusing natural resources unconscionably.

Finally, big projects yield clout and money for politicians, for if they are themselves not civil contractors (most of them are), then their friends are, and even otherwise, there are sizeable commissions to be made from project and canal contracts, which cannot even be imagined in the case of other irrigation programmes. For instance, according to the grapevine, Rambhoopal Reddy, the MLA who recently vacated the Panyam assembly seat so that chief minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy could get elected to the assembly, demanded and got Rs 50 lakh as 'protection money' from the construction company engaged in building canals for the World Bank-aided Srisailam Right Bank Canal project, which partly runs through the Panyam constituency. It would be difficult to imagine even one-hundredth of that

[2] Jayalalitha heads the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party in Tamil Nadu and has been three times chief minister of the state. During her first term, in 1992, she had undertaken an indefinite fast over the implementation of the Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal's interim award.

amount going the way of local MLAs if the nation's irrigation policy had been more democratic.

Thus, the river Krishna, in which there is little water left for any new projects, becomes the focus of all discussion on drought in Rayalaseema and southern Telangana, the principal areas of drought in AP. Politicians talk incessantly of bringing the waters of the Krishna to their respective districts. Their plaint that the coastal districts of AP have benefited twice over from the Krishna river is quite true and just. First with the barrage built across the Krishna river by the British in the 1850s, and then with the Nagarjunasagar project of the post-independence years—which was one of the occasions when Nehru employed his famous 'temples of modernity' idiom—the Krishna waters have been taken up and down the central coast of AP to water today's Green Revolution fields. The Srisailam project upstream on the same river was reserved for hydel production. Due to persistent agitation by politicians and people of southern Telangana and Rayalaseema, Srisailam has been converted into a multi-purpose project, and canals are being dug to water parts of Nalgonda in Telangana, and in the Kurnool and Cuddapah districts of Rayalaseema. God—or rather the World Bank—willing, the canals would be soon complete.

This is undoubtedly a positive achievement of the landlord–politician class of drought-hit Telangana and Rayalaseema, to the extent that they are responsible for it. But this class never talks about the destruction of tank irrigation and the overexploitation of groundwater, sins which this class itself and its government have been party to. Much less does it talk about the complete neglect of rain-fed lands, in which nobody is at all interested, for those who have the money can sink a borewell, and the others can go to hell.

Yet the actual nature of the cultivation is precisely the reverse of these priorities. In southern Telangana, 84 per cent of the cultivated land is rain-fed, while in Rayalaseema, the corresponding figure is 82 per cent. Of the total irrigated land, 65 per cent in Rayalaseema and 62 per cent in southern Telangana is irrigated by tanks and wells. The remaining land is under canal irrigation. The completion of the Srisailam left and right canals would not alter the picture qualitatively. In the foreseeable future, Telangana and Rayalaseema are going to be preponderantly rain-fed regions, and yet rain-fed land figures in the political polemics concerning drought only as land that is potentially to be flooded by the waters of the Krishna—or even far-off rivers such as the Godavari—if and when those waters are brought to the parched lands of Rayalaseema and southern Telangana.

The manner in which tank irrigation has been destroyed is both criminal and pathetic. Both Telangana and Rayalaseema have a large number of irrigation tanks. While tanks and wells are equal providers of irrigation in Telangana, in Rayalaseema wells predominate over tanks. Most of the tanks in Rayalaseema were built during the reign of the Rayas of Vijayanagar (after whom the region gets its name), while in Telangana, successive rulers from the Kakatiya kings onwards paid attention to the building and the improvement of tanks.

It is customary to hypothesise about a 'village community' that collectively maintained and benefited from the tanks. It is a fact that the 'village community' (whatever that expression conveys) took an active interest in the tank system, but the process was not exactly idyllic. The maintenance of the tanks was undertaken by using the forced labour of the dalits and other lower castes. If the upper castes also chipped in with labour, it was only because they were the principal beneficiaries of the tank system. Even all of them did not enjoy equitable access to tank water. The priority rights over tank water lay with the dominant landholders of the dominant castes, and the others had access only on their sufferance. At any rate, this was the situation as we know it during the early decades of this century, and there is no reason to imagine a golden age of equitable community spirit that degenerated to the depths of self-interest in the historical equivalent of the age of 'Kali', that is, British rule. The fact that there was a greater community spirit in the medieval Indian village than is possible in today's world does not mean that the whole village thought and acted as one. That community spirit was principally caste centred and did not always extend to the whole of the village community. Tank irrigation thrived in conjunction with the caste-determined rural Indian social structure. Its benefits accrued to those at the top but the maintenance of the tanks was done through the use of the forced labour (the caste obligation) of those at the bottom of the social structure. The British did nothing to break the caste system but their system of heavy taxation and other attendant changes upset the erstwhile agrarian arrangements to varied extents. With the spread of democratic ideas and movements, the caste obligation of the dalits has been socially rejected by the lower castes and juridically abolished by the modern Indian state. The state should then have taken upon itself the burden of maintaining the tanks but it did no such thing. The rural rich were just not interested in maintaining them if they could not get them to be maintained free by the poor. Instead, they took to well irrigation, which was improved during the later years with the advent of electric/diesel pumpsets and borewells. That took care of their fields, and they would continue to enjoy their first priority access to tank water as long as the

tanks existed. Of course, nothing much could be done if the tanks in due course became defunct due to negligence. They had their electric pumpsets, and deeper and deeper borewells, and they would put pressure upon the government to implement more projects on far-off rivers to satisfy their political constituency, but that was about all. The 'village community' could look after itself. Indeed, many of them have converted the silted tank beds into cultivable land, and parcelled it among themselves or their faithful followers. Housing plots have been carved in the beds of tanks situated near urban centres with everybody's connivance, and entire housing colonies have come up in tank beds close to even small towns. And there are also cases wherein brick kilns have been set up in tank beds.

Thus, parallel to a preponderant interest in big projects on the part of the state, and an indiscriminate spread of well irrigation—not only geographic spread but a deepening that goes down to 170 or 220 feet these days—there is a rapid deterioration of the excellent tank system and total neglect of the water retention capacity of the soil, and of tank and stream catchments, in both Telangana and Rayalaseema. Rayalaseema has lower rainfall than Telangana and, therefore, needs a more careful husbanding of the soil and of rainwater as well as a more diligent maintenance of tanks. It has thus been a bigger sufferer, but certain parts of Telangana, especially Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar districts, threaten to match Rayalaseema in terms of the destructive neglect.

There is, for example, quite a big irrigation tank at Gooty in the Anantapur district of Rayalaseema. Since Anantapur is one of the worst among the drought-hit districts in the country, the tank had gone dry many years ago and nobody had bothered about its ill-maintained bund and silted bed. Suddenly, four years ago, it rained heavily in the catchment of the tank and water from the drought-denuded land rushed into the tank. The tank filled fast and the bund breached, washing away the Gooty–Guntakal road and the crops sown all around. The much-awaited rains left devastated crops and a freshly emptied tank behind. Commenting on the state of ill-maintenance of tanks, a local official then said, 'In the good old days it was enough for the reddy to snap his fingers and the labourers would rush to repair the breach . . . who commands such respect these days . . .' (reddy, in Rayalaseema, is both the name of a caste and the designation of the village headman, the *mukhia*). This variant of the idyllic village community theme, which turns up in nostalgic social science writings, expresses the problem succinctly. The reddys of Rayalaseema have not stopped snapping their fingers but for achieving other purposes these days, such as getting votes rigged on election day. And the snapping of fingers is obeyed not as a caste obligation but as a more complex subservience to the economic, social and political power that is of little use in repairing tanks. And so the Gooty tank remained neglected, though the breach of four years ago was temporarily filled up with sand bags. This year there was again a heavy downpour in the neighbouring hills of Kurnool district. The water rushing down the naked hillsides rushed fast into the Gooty tank, once again filling it and breaching its bund. This time the Hyderabad–Bangalore national highway and the Madras–Bombay rail route were temporarily washed away along with the farmers' fields, and, therefore, the breach made national news. The tank is again empty and the farmers in its ayacut are a bemused lot, for they are told that rainfall has paradoxically been well above normal in Anantapur this drought season, and that therefore, they need have no fears.

As stated above, the wanton destruction of the tank system has been paralleled by an alarming overexploitation of groundwater by those who can afford the cost. One of the worst affected districts in this matter is Nalgonda. Farmers in the arid areas of the district are no longer talking of dug wells. These wells exist but they have all gone dry. They began going dry with the shortage of rain and then they all went dry as the bores came. These days, the only wells being talked about are borewells, which means that only a section of the farming community is talking of wells. As the bores go deeper and deeper, more and more farmers are pushed out of the class that has access to groundwater, for a deep bore renders neighbouring bores dry, like the hungry roots of some giant tree, wherein the tubes reach lower and lower into the bowels of the earth to pump out water into the paddy fields. The borewell companies too are mostly owned by the rural-elite-turned-businessmen of the district. It is these companies of Nalgonda that are at the forefront of the assault on the state's groundwater resources.

What happens to those who are thus pushed out of the race? The answer is that when the rains fail, these people join the ranks of those who were never in the race. They sell off their bullocks, pair by pair, hoping that the last pair would not have to be sold, for at least one pair would be needed if and when it rains. They sell them as cheap as Rs 1,000 a pair, knowing well enough that when the need arises again, the bullocks cannot be bought for less than Rs 3,000 each. The cattle are driven to the weekly cattle fairs in villages and towns, an institution that is still widely extant in Telangana, and more so in Rayalaseema. Even at normal times, there is a trickle of bullocks that goes the way of butchers, though the principal sales are from farmers via middlemen. But with the onset of the drought, it is the slaughterhouses that take over the weekly cattle fair. Dozens of lorry-loads

of cattle are taken away—with the legs of the animals deliberately broken at the knee joints to prevent them from jumping off the vehicle—each week from almost all the cattle fairs in the drought-hit districts.

There was, of course, a time when governments used to have a policy of selling some amount of partially subsidised fodder to needy farmers. The amount supplied is usually extremely inadequate as compared to the need—one week's fodder for one pair of cattle sold to about one farmer in a hundred is a fair description of the relief usually given—but at least a token attempt at fodder supply used to be made. This season the government of AP has not deigned to indulge in such a tokenism. With supreme aplomb, the farmers were told that the government would spend money only on long-term measures such as construction of percolation tanks, check dams and drinking water bores, and would not spend money on immediate relief, for that is a drain on the budget and does not improve assets. But as cattle constitute a long-term asset and the denial of such a short-term need as fodder has resulted in a long-term loss, whereas check dams and percolation tanks are such long-term things that they never happen, and the long-term drinking water bores go dry after a short term, the farmers are understandably facing a thorough semantic confusion about what is 'long term' and what 'short term'. But the truth seems to be that as part of the ongoing fiscal restructuring under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund, both the funds and the philosophy are lacking for the provision of any such wasteful thing as drought relief.

As the cattle go to the slaughterhouses, their owners go to a different kind of a slaughter. (It was the ancient Indian rishis who first spoke unblushingly of quadruped cattle and biped cattle.) These former cattle owners migrate to canal-irrigated areas, if there are any nearby, to offer their labour cheap for transplanting and weeding paddy; if there are none nearby, they migrate to Hyderabad or farther still to that mother of slums called Bombay. The horrors of last December and January that forced as many South Indians as Muslims to leave that city are mostly forgotten; anyway, those who came back that time are different from those who are going there now. That city's employers of cheap imigrant labour and the Shiv Sena have a different set of prospective victims now.

The most systematic migration takes place from Mahbubnagar, a perpetually and very severely drought-hit district of southern Telangana. Since the district was called Palamur until it was renamed Mahbubnagar in honour of Nizam-ul-mulk Mahbub Ali Khan, its migrant labour is popularly known as Palamur labour. It is estimated that irrespective of whether the government recognises a year as a drought year or not, about five lakh labourers migrate out of the district nine months in a year to work on project sites in all corners of the country. They work in bondage to labour contractors who are attached to project construction companies. They are paid some advance in the village and taken to the project site to work for the specified duration—usually about nine months from the end of the kharif sowing season and transplanting till the next kharif season. Their capacity for hard work and their pride that the toil of Palamur labour has created projects in all corners of the country is matched by their miserable living and working conditions—poor quality of food, low wages, wretched dwellings, exposure to infections, denial of all legitimate rights of workers and sexual harassment of women. If the normal migration is five lakh a year, the figure gets bloated during the years which are officially recognised as years of drought.

Statistical estimates of how much rainwater gets stored in usable form—underground, in the tanks, or in the soil—and how much goes unused do not really deserve the honour that is unthinkingly accorded to numerical information in the prevalent positivist intellectual climate, yet the rough estimate that only about half the rainfall finds its way for use in our country is revealing. As mentioned earlier, Telangana has an undulating and rock-studded terrain marked by numerous big and small streams. The big streams (called *vagu* in Telugu) have a steady and usually sandy bed, whereas the small streams (called *vorre* in the idiom peculiar to Telangana) are more like wild slashes in the earth and have no proper beds. In the past, irrigation tanks have been constructed in such a way that they are fed by the *vagus* and *vorres*. And the tanks are usually part of a system whereby two to half a dozen of them are built in a manner so that the overflow from those placed above feeds through streams into those placed below. There is considerable scope for using modern engineering techniques for improving and maintaining this system. One does read and hear about such projects in official documents and speeches but nothing seems to be getting done. Although the situation in Rayalaseema is worse than that in Telangana as it has a relatively flat terrain, what is really lacking is the intent to ensure that whatever rainfall does occur is made available to the people for drinking and cultivation.

While a positive intent is absent, the unrestricted process of development leads to a contrary effect. We have already highlighted the overexploitation of groundwater through borewell technology, which has even led to a shortage of drinking water in quite a few villages, though the drinking water problem could be officially fully solved by the installation of multiple drinking water bores in almost all the villages, and of the conversion of

tank beds into fields, housing colonies and brick kilns. We will end with another striking example. The flourishing growth of Hyderabad during the last decade has led to extensive quarrying of sand, which is most accessible in the numerous streams of the neighbouring Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar districts, streams that feed the irrigation tanks. Quite a few streams of these districts, located within 100 to 150 km of the state's capital city, have been emptied of most of the sand in the bed, leaving the bed hard and flat. The effect of this is that when it does rain, the water that rushes into the stream, which would normally have percolated gently through the sandy bed and would have partly augmented the groundwater and partly fed into some tank, now becomes a flash flood that breaches tanks and floods the surroundings. The neighbouring farmers were the first to notice that sand-quarrying in streams was resulting in the loss of potential groundwater recharge, and that their wells were drying up faster than normal after the sand in streams near their village started getting carted in lorries to Hyderabad. A grumbling agitation is brewing in the villages located near the affected streams of Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar districts, which are even otherwise situated in the drought belt.

Many more such examples can be cited to indicate how, in the absence of a positive policy regarding rainwater conservation, the 'natural' process of development works in a contrary direction and destroys the existing mechanisms of storage, retention and recharge, all of which becomes a part of 'drought', regardless of whether or not the monsoon has failed, except that when the monsoon does actually fail, all the hidden sores get exposed and take the alarmingly conspicuous form of cattle being led to slaughter, parched fields cracking up, and an occasional poor man or woman dying of hunger.

Seshan in Kurnool

EPW, 23 July 1994

The Chief Election Commissioner of India, T.N. Seshan, evokes a lot of absurd images. An unconstitutional temper dedicated to a constitutional passion, a cantankerous arbitrariness forever insistent on rectitude and propriety in others, met from the other side with solemn arguments about breach of constitutional authority by politicians, who recognise no constitutional basis for the authority they exercise, and who have so efficiently shaped the electoral process into an instrument of power and plunder that they find it infuriating that a mere public servant can upset the rules they have devised and smugly worked out among themselves, for themselves and by themselves—that is surely a setting that can only call forth images of absurdity. What enrages politicians so much about Seshan is that he is so much like them; arbitrary, arrogant, an unruly bully when he can get away with it and a model of humble rectitude when the courts pull him up. And while perforce the two of them debate the matter in terms of a dubious disjunction between legality and popular sovereignty, one could infer that all right things are usually attempted by the wrong people; that it takes excesses to make moderation possible; that reason is given a hearing only when it is taken to unreasonable lengths; and that it is well-nigh impossible that right things may be achieved by right persons using the right means advocated to just the right extent.

Seshan looks (at least in his photographs) and behaves so much like a

bull that one is tempted to call him a bull in a china shop, except that Indian politics is no chinaware, neither in fragility nor innocence (and one is, of course, not talking of aesthetics). One could describe his effort at electoral reform as tilting at windmills, except that the windmills themselves are so genuinely scared that there is evidently something to his effort that is not merely quixotic. One could see in him a sadhu preaching to a dacoit gang, but this is one sadhu who himself speaks the dacoits' language. One could call him a fool rushing in where angels know better than to tread in, but then a lot of angels appear to look forward with genuine hope to what this fool can do.

One could, therefore, do worse than to take Seshan a little more seriously. It requires no great intellectual effort to recognise that while he may trim the excesses of electoral combats a little, he cannot finish the task of making India a full-fledged electoral democracy. But that 'little' is firstly, not worthless by itself, and secondly, in the case of all human effort at reform and change, what is often more important than the material alteration achieved is the value system generated thereby, for that value system creates an altered culture which shapes future social behaviour. Human beings live by the values their culture believes in, and the creation of new values, the consolidation of a new framework of values for human social behaviour, which would, in turn, impel people to confront the systemic obstacles to change, is what every effort at change principally achieves. The change achieved can only be slight in the case of a lone effort by a cantankerous individual whose intentions are not always very straight or very clear, but the effort is nevertheless worth taking seriously. In particular, it is important to examine the cultural and systemic obstacles that Seshan's effort, which may be taken deservedly or not at face value, would have to face, in the hinterland of Indian democracy.

The people of Kurnool district in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh have had election after election forced upon them; while the discerning among them know better than anybody else that their society and culture are least ready for electoral democracy of any kind. First, the MP from Nandyal resigned and the people were directed to elect the nation's prime minister[1] to parliament, and with a record lead to boot. And then Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, the MP from Kurnool and union law minister, was made chief minister of the state, which meant that he too had to be elected

[1] Refers to P.V. Narasimha Rao (1921–2004), former prime minister of India from 1991 to 1996 who won the by-election from Nandyal in 1991 with a record margin of 5 lakh votes. For Balagopal's analysis of this, see his 'Meham in Nandyal' in Section IV of this volume.

to the state assembly. Panyam was vacated for him and the people were directed to elect the chief minister ('otherwise there will be no development for Kurnool'). They did their best and did elect him, but the 'big man' was not happy with the votes he did not get. He said in public meeting after public meeting after getting elected, that he knew who had campaigned against him and would 'take care of them, whether they are high or low'. And then, of course, the parliament seat of Kurnool vacated by him had to be filled, and who should be the Congress candidate but his son? It was his seat that he had vacated, to serve the people better, and who should the inheritance go to but his dear son, whether according to the Hindu or any other property law? And so the people of Kurnool were directed to elect the son to parliament on 26 May this year, and they have dutifully done so, except that he scraped through with a rather small lead. So base is the people's ingratitude, even to men who have served them for decades and are bent on serving them forever, from father to son, from father to son, from father to son...

But that is not our story. Our story concerns the following questions: what exactly does the electoral process mean in a district like Kurnool; and what must happen before electoral democracy becomes a thing of substance there; and how little of it comes within the purview of the Election Commission, whether that consists of one, two or three members; and is there a chief among them who is more equal than the others; and will that chief be Seshan in perpetuity? This is, of course, not at all to say that what the Election Commission can do is altogether immaterial, or that the recent debate about its reconstitution is a vacuous debate. The people of Kurnool themselves did not think so during the by-election this May. The least literate of them had heard of this miracle man called Seshan, who had put the fear of the law in the hearts of the lawless lords of their lives, and they were so curious to know what the creature looks like that when Seshan stopped off at a small town in Kurnool constituency on the way to Mantralayam[2] (he seems to visit gods as frequently as politicians do), villagers flocked around to see him as if he were a film star.

Jagadurti is a village off the Hyderabad–Bangalore national highway. It is ruled by the former sarpanch, Lakshmi Reddy, an elderly man, and uncle of sorts of chief minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy. This old man evidently belongs to an era that pre-dates even notional democracy, for he takes

[2] A town in Kurnool district located on the banks of the river Tungabhadra. The place is considered holy for Hindus since it houses the memorial of the sixteenth-century Madhva brahmin saint Raghavendra Swamy.

pride in the fact that there is little of it in his village. No sir, nobody campaigns for any party other than the party he supports—which happens to be the Congress but could well be the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) some day—in his village. It has never happened, and it would be improper if it ever did happen. He himself sits as the poll agent inside the booth, and people show him the stamped ballot paper before consigning it to the box. It has always been so. It is a tradition of the village, and it would be improper if anybody violated it today. Will the opposition party find a poll agent in the village? Well, nobody from the village would actually sit as an opposition agent in the village, for that would also be improper and contrary to the traditions of the village. But since it is said that according to some statutory vanity, all candidates have a right to have their agents in every booth, even if they are so poorly off that nobody from the village would sit on their behalf, well then, they can get an agent from outside and he would be treated as an honoured guest, according to the village traditions. But such an agent should, in turn, respect the village traditions and not behave impolitely. That would be improper. Finally, he has heard of some stupid electoral rule or fancy that all the votes of a village cannot be cast for a single candidate, even if the village has no tradition of differing in such matters, and that if there is 100 per cent unanimity in the election of a candidate, there will be a repoll, which he thinks is utterly stupid and undemocratic, but as such is the law, he himself sees to it that the opposition candidate gets the last 10 per cent of the votes. The people are thus directed to vote for the worthless fellow.

This is not an isolated village. There are plenty of villages in the district where landlords who are close relatives or followers of the chief minister rule life with such completeness. What happens to those who resist their authority? They can be killed. They can be banished from the village and their property destroyed or seized. On should not think that this violence is committed by some paid agents or hirelings of the landlord. The landlord's loyal following would normally consist of quite ordinary villagers, who would lynch the disobedient with a genuine sense of outrage. There is, for instance, a complaint made by the TDP to the Chief Election Commissioner about the sub-inspector (SI) of police, Kodumur, who they alleged had forced a TDP supporter to remove the party flag and banner from his house. The SI's explanation is that the man's village is close to the chief minister's native village Laddagiri, right on the road in fact, from Laddagiri to the *mandal* headquarters, and so if this man continued to sport TDP insignia, he would cause needless provocation to the men of Laddagiri passing by, and as the loyalty of that village to Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's family is well known, that would have fatal consequences. That is why, the SI insists, he had advised the TDP supporter, in his own interest and as part of the policeman's official duty to prevent cognisable offences, to remove the party banner and flag and 'silently vote for the TDP in the anonymity of the polling booth if he wanted to', an act of thoughtful charity and dutiful policing that the TDP leaders misunderstood. Irrespective of the honesty of the policeman's explanation, the fact that he chose this as a credible explanation reveals a lot about society in rural Kurnool.

There is another Lakshmi Reddy, an even closer uncle of the chief minister, who rules over the village of Lakkasagaram. This is an airtight monarchy into which not a single whiff of liberty has ever entered. Even N.T. Rama Rao would pass by this village during his electoral visits to the area and hold meetings elsewhere. A stranger who enters the village cannot and will not be allowed to talk to the residents directly. The residents themselves would be either too scared to talk or would quite sincerely regard such liberty as an outrage. Any talking that is to be done will be done by Lakshmi Reddy, and that is that. It would be difficult to convince many (though mercifully not all) people of the village that there is anything wrong in this.

It can be argued (and landlords frequently do argue) that quite apart from the last 10 per cent or so of the votes, which those who rule the village themselves direct should be cast for the opposition in the case of uncomfortable electoral unanimity in the village, there is nothing at all to prevent at least the courageous among the dissenters from voting for the opposition in the anonymity of the polling booth (and if you do not have the courage, why ever should you dissent?). The possibility certainly does exist, and seems to have been utilised in sizeable measure this May, going by the final result. And the possibility has certainly been enhanced by Seshan. The earlier practice was either that the voter shows the stamped ballot paper to the landlord's agent sitting inside the booth before putting it in the box; or that the polling agent would himself stamp each ballot paper and hand it over to the voter to personally put in the box, as a token of democracy; or worse still that four or five of the landlord's men would themselves stamp all the ballot papers (including some in favour of the opposition) without troubling voters to come all the way to the booth, and put them all in the box, in the presence of the gaping poll officials. And there would be no opposition agent sitting in the booth to protest; or if there is one and he did protest, or if the representatives of the opposition candidate came there and protested, there would be bomb-throwing and violence, and possibly a murder or two. Seshan's insistence on deploying large contingents of paramilitary at the booths, and on strictly preventing

big groups of persons from moving around on poll day has encouraged the TDP to send its agents from outside the district to each booth to protest at every malpractice. They could not prevent all impersonation, for the agents from outside could not possibly know who is who in each village, and where they did try, as in Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's native village Laddagiri, they were physically driven out of the village. Yet the presence of the police and the opposition poll agents did cut down the rigging in most villages. The decision of the Election Commission not to count votes booth-wise, which would reveal which locality voted in large numbers for whom, also gave courage to the voters to exercise their choice more freely than ever.

All this has helped, and many have publicly acknowledged the victory of Seshan in making the recent by-election to the Kurnool parliamentary seat more democratic than any election before it in the district. And yet elections are not won simply by voters secretly deciding in their hearts whom to vote for and exercising that choice in the secrecy of the polling booth. The liberty to campaign and create a climate of opinion in favour of the opposition candidate is an essential aspect of electoral democracy, and this is where the rules and procedures of the Election Commission are of little help against the entrenched social terror exercised by the armed landlords. It is impossible to provide heavy police escorts for every campaign meeting of every candidate in every village. And even if that were possible, that would only apply to the campaign meetings held by outsiders coming to the village, which can be held, at most, only once in each village of a constituency even in the most intense campaign. One cannot think of any security at all for villagers who are living in the village and campaigning by word of mouth in the village. Even if they go unmolested prior to the poll out of fear of the action that the very arbitrary and unpredictable Seshan may take, after the poll is over and the result is declared, after Seshan's men are back in Delhi and his jurisdiction over the happenings in Kurnool is terminated, there can and will be retaliatory murders and arson targeted at those in the village who openly sided with the opposition candidate. Tell anti-Congress voters in Kurnool to exercise not merely their vote but the whole gamut of their political liberty freely, and they will ask you in return, 'Will you be with us in the village after the poll is over? You won't? Then don't advise us.'

Apart from the liberty to differ from the 'big men' of the village and openly express the difference, what is even more important is a culture in which such liberty is recognised and prized. However, what prevails in Rayalaseema, on the other hand, is a culture in which the human traits of loyalty and faith are tied to the feudal–patriarchal mode of society. Consequently, the liberty we are speaking of may well be seen as an illegitimate disloyalty to the natural leaders and elders of society, and would be recognised as legitimate only if there exists an opposition faction within the dominant class to whom the loyalty can be transferred. Since this trait exists conjointly with the people's disposition to a violent expression of anger, which is again sharper in Rayalaseema than elsewhere, the desire for individual liberty is likely to attract violent hostility from one's own fellow creatures, and persons of one's own class, caste and family. Even in factional conflicts among followers of different reddy landlords, the violent anger and hatred that can and does divide close kith and kin is startling to an observer unfamiliar with the specific mode of feudal culture dominant in Rayalaseema.

If we leave aside the generality of the feudal–patriarchal culture, not every village of Kurnool or any of the Rayalaseema districts answers completely to the above description. There are plenty of villages where some degree of freedom from social terror does exist. But simultaneously, there are also plenty of villages which are ruled totally by landlords such as the two Lakshmi Reddys described above, along with their gangs armed invariably with country-made bombs, and often also guns. Over the last decade and a half, Rayalaseema 'warlordism' has become a structure unto itself that has MLAs and ministers at the top, civil and excise contractors, smugglers and less disreputable businessmen at the middle, and village landlords at the base. It determines and dominates all spheres of political as well as civil society. Chief minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy has for long been a seemingly gentlemanly operator situated in the upper echelons of this warlord structure, though after becoming chief minister, he has shown that he possesses quite ungentlemanly fangs in addition to a gentlemanly demeanour.

The guns at one time used to be mostly illegal weapons acquired or made at home. The bombs, of course, are made locally, and (Manmohan Singh, please take note) if the manufacture is legalised and its extent properly estimated, it would make a sizeable addition to the GDP of Rayalaseema without any further investment. The people themselves joke that bombs are as cheaply available as putrefied vegetables. But during the last five years or so, the number of guns has also multiplied and gun licences are easier to obtain now as quite a few of the warlords have risen to important positions in the state government. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, Mysoora Reddy and Diwakar Reddy (from Kurnool, Cuddapah and Anantapur districts, respectively) have been and are in powerful positions. And the principal Congress dissident, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy from Cuddapah is an archetypal

warlord. Gun licences are, therefore, much easier to obtain, with their own men at the top. One can commit a murder and apply for a gun licence for fear of retaliation, by claiming that one has been 'falsely implicated in the case' by the police; the kith and kin of the deceased apply for a gun licence exhibiting the corpse of the slain man as proof of a bona fide threat to life. As both the parties have their own men as MLAs and ministers at Hyderabad, both acquire gun licences in due course. The granting of such licences is supposed to be preceded by a local police enquiry concerning the applicant's criminal proclivities, but such inconveniences are easily avoided. As policemen bemoan these days, 'These fellows do not even give their home addresses in the application. They give a Hyderabad address and get hold of some MLA or minister who ensures that the local police dutifully certify that the man has no criminal record locally and get the licence, and it is only when we see the fellow going around with a gun back home that we realise he has gone and got a gun licence.'

The point is that this weaponry increases the terror exercised by the owners of the weapons. The terror is a means of property acquisition; it is a means of political power and patronage. All manner of petty local bullies gather around these armed lords, and constitute a formidable obstacle to any democratic assertion, whether electoral or otherwise.

These armed gangs are anachronistically described as 'rural factions' in police and administrative parlance, though they have evidently outgrown their origins in village factionalism. It is a paradox that they are today seen (though not always vocally condemned) as an obstacle to democracy and development, for it is precisely the kind of political democracy and economic development that India has achieved which is at the root of the evolution of warlord gangs from their pre-Independence roots in what may properly be called village factionalism. There is a long history in the Rayalaseema districts of village factions born of conflict between reddy landlords (as also a few non-reddy landlords and elders of close-knit castes such as the boyas) over property and power (and sometimes women). Every slight, imagined or real, has to be avenged as viciously as every substantial challenge to one's power, property or prestige. Assault, murder and burning of houses and corn-stacks were the principal means of the assertion of one's strength and 'manhood'. And, of course, each such attack had to be avenged with equal 'manliness' from the other side. This meant the creation of hereditary enmity that went on from generation to generation, often until one family was either exterminated or driven out of the village. It also meant the creation of loyal gangs from among poorer caste-men and lower castes by each warring side, and as the gangs indulged in mutual violence, subsidiary enmity would be created between fresh families lower down the social scale. These gangs (even today) are different from urban mafiosi in two respects. One is that they are made up not of professional criminals but peasants (though they do involve themselves in illicit activity such as smuggling forest produce, growing opium or making liquor illegally). Secondly, what binds the gang to the master is not only pecuniary or other material benefit (though there is often plenty of it) but also an intense feudal loyalty, the loyalty owed as a matter of traditional dharma, to the 'elders' of the village, which means either upper caste landlords or the hereditary elders of each caste, especially the tight-knit castes such as the very militant and clannish boyas. Over this factionalism was superimposed another trait that Rayalaseema inherited from the anarchy which followed the demise of the 'war-state' of the Rayas of Vijayanagar, which was the rule of armed chieftains (sometimes called polegars) over groups of villages, a few or hundreds in extent, a rule that amounted to little more than plain plunder by the chieftain and his violent gang of caste-men and followers.

The British did their bit to subdue this two-tiered feudal structure of violence, or at least to come to terms with it. They failed, no doubt because for them it represented merely a problem of public order and crime. But political democracy and economic development during the post-independence period has peculiarly enhanced, politicised and modernised this phenomenon. Indian electoral democracy has undoubtedly led to a lot of political awakening among the poor and the oppressed, and even a certain amount of empowerment of these classes. But in its principal aspect, it has functioned less as a means of ascertaining and enthroning the will of the majority than as a means of sharing patronage, power and property among the rich and the powerful. It has also functioned as a means of re-channelising the forms of traditional power and property into modern channels. And therefore, the violence of the armed landlord factions has fitted neatly into electoral combat, while the sanctity and the position of an 'elected representative' has lent ideological legitimacy as well as some amount of 'state power' to the erstwhile armed lord. From the village sarpanch to the MLA, most of the elected representatives today are leaders of gangs armed to the teeth, and the consequent terror they perpetrate is a decisive factor in deciding elections.

As for economic development in Rayalaseema, the semi-arid region has little potential for growth based on agricultural prosperity. It is, on the other hand, rich in minerals and commercially valuable slab stone, and hence quarrying and processing is a major economic activity. This rough

work suits the rough culture of the region, and it was soon enough discovered that whoever controls the gun and the bomb also controls the quarry-based industry and trade. The guns and the gangs that had first come into being in village factional fights turned their attention—just as they turned their attention to electoral politics—to the quarrying and polishing of stone. The units can be owned and operated by harmless entrepreneurs (it is too much of a bother looking after the economics of running the enterprises) and the armed warlord gangs step in as 'protectors', and collect tolls on every piece of material quarried or shifted out.

Then there are also the civil and excise contracts offered by the public sector economy, such as contracts for the laying of roads, the digging of canals and the vending of liquor in retail. Indeed, everything monopolised by the state, be it forests, public works or liquor, creates contractors in its execution, transport and retail vending, and if one can drive out all competitors at the auction, one can take the contract for a high profit margin, and then either execute it, or (if that is too much of a bother) subcontract it out to somebody else. Once again, therefore, the bomb and the gun have helped create a monopoly in public works and other contracts. Territory is parcelled out among the warlords into zones wherein none competes against another, and if any outsider enters the fray, he is either politely bought out or abruptly bombed out.

Thus, the economy and politics of post-independence India have helped develop the feuding village factions into big mafiosi that use armed terror as a decisive means of dominating politics and the economy, and gradually, the whole of social life. All social problems and conflicts end up at the palatial houses of the warlords, to be decided with the threat or infliction of violence, and in accordance with the very primitive notions of equity, morality and fairness that the warlords possess. Disputes pertaining to property, contract, marriage, divorce and every conceivable familial and interpersonal problem find an abrupt and final resolution there. The problems are robbed of their delicacy and sensitivity, and of their social, political and ethical dimensions, and reduced either to the customary feudal–patriarchal notions of rectitude or—one does not know whether this is worse or better—the mere calculation of factional political advantage.

It is in such a society that we are speaking of the Election Commission's dicta. Till now, in the faction-ridden villages of Rayalaseema, the people have had some freedom only when two gangsters are at loggerheads with each other, thereby giving the people a chance to 'play one devil against the other', as the people themselves say. But viewing the problem in this way involves romanticising the people as helpless victims of armed gangs, whereas a lot of them are, simultaneously and knowingly, loyal partisans in the warfare. They do not constitute an innocent entity waiting to be liberated from the mafiosi but are largely faithful and conscious participants in the violence and the terror that robs their society of democracy and justice. One may then (following a strong current philosophical fashion) question this notion of democracy and justice as being alien, occidental or elitist, but the test is not an eclectic relativism which decrees to each what they believe they want, but whether a given social structure and culture, and the way they mould human traits in society, are conducive to the promotion of a life which assures the full development of each person (concurrently with the full development of all). If this criterion too is described as a Western value, one can either point out that there is a grain of it in the Buddha, or else say so much the worse for the East–West dichotomy.

Without the notion of a democracy and justice that transcends the feudal-patriarchal culture of Rayalaseema, the only freedom available to people within the culture, a freedom that they exercise with great violence, is the freedom to change masters and suffer more violence in the process. The May 26 by-election in Kurnool saw explicit group violence and police firing at the village of Eerladinne. This village is close to Kothakota, the native village of Prakash Reddy, nephew of the chief minister. Only a few years ago, this bearded young man was regarded as Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's political heir. Government officials in Kurnool did his bidding though he was not even an MLA. And it was this man who masterminded the shameless drama of abduction and wrongful confinement of prospective candidates at the time of P.V. Narasimha Rao's Nandyal election. He was also at the forefront of the massive rigging that heralded the prime minister's entry into parliament. It was predicted that this Prakash Reddy would rise to great heights in the state's politics. But his tragedy was that he was only a nephew and not the son. For the chief minister does have a son, named Suryaprakash Reddy, apparently a good-for-nothing in political warfare, but a son nevertheless. Gradually, the son rose and the nephew set, and when the son was openly promoted as the Congress candidate for the Kurnool by-poll, the nephew defected to the eager TDP, which habitually waits at the back door to lap up disenchanted Congress gangsters as they come out, and spends time in the interval lecturing people about the evils of the culture of the gun promoted by the Congress in Rayalaseema. Having joined the TDP, Prakash Reddy vowed to defeat the chief minister's son.

Eerladinne is one of the half a dozen villages in the neighbourhood of Prakash Reddy's native Kothakota, which were entirely under that man's thumb. They had lived in feudal peace, voting and living as Prakash Reddy

desired. The obedience, as mentioned above, is due partly to the traditional and willing loyalty that a powerful reddy commands, and partly to the terror induced by the proximity of his guns. When such leaders switch parties, the people too normally switch their electoral loyalties. Thus, soon there was the strange sight of all the walls in Kothakota being adorned with yellow-coloured posters of a smiling NTR, whereas that man would not have been able to so much as hold an election rally in the village in the past.

However, Eerladinne, though in the domain of Prakash Reddy, did not switch over loyalties completely. A couple of local reddys decided to stay with the chief minister, and so the village split into two, with one section exhibiting passionate loyalty to Prakash Reddy in his new apparel, and the other being full of a newfound passion against him. As it happened, the election booth was located near the houses of those loyal to Prakash Reddy. On poll day, when the renegades went to vote, the loyalists deliberately picked up a quarrel with them and chased them away by pelting stones and sticks at them. But the renegades were not deterred. They regrouped by afternoon and went in a bunch in a couple of tractors and voted for the Congress, defying the loyalists' wrath. This defiance is undoubtedly a democratic assertion, but in the interest of another reddy. And moreover soon, they may have to pay heavily for it if the TDP comes to power, a not unlikely eventuality in the coming elections, in which case Prakash Reddy is bound to become a powerful man.

Not all of India is Kurnool, but there is a little bit of Kurnool in the most civilised part of the country. And there are, of course, entire regions of the country, including certain metropolitan slums, which are no different from Kurnool. Regardless of the form and meaning we give to electoral democracy as an instrument of representative government, the social structure and culture of a sizeable part of India is a hindrance to it. A lot of drastic change needs to take place in the existing social structure and culture before it can become genuinely representative, irrespective of formal alterations that may be made. While this has been so for a long time, the rapid deterioration of the political establishment that we see today has its concomitant in the increasing incidence of suppressive violence resorted to by the rich and the powerful, a violence against which the unorganised weak have no defence unless they happen to be part of a rival gang.

This situation is enough to defeat any bureaucratic attempt to make democratic political choice in elections a reality. To say this is not to advocate defeatism but to point out that the task of evolving a genuine representative democracy in India is much bigger than can be deduced from the debate centred on P.V. Narasimha Rao's childish attempts to cut Seshan to size. It is a much more difficult cultural and political task than voting against the constitutional amendment dreamt up by a prime minister whose imagination cannot rise above that of a village patwari.

Popular Struggles

Some Questions for Communist Theory and Practice

Undercurrents, 22 August 1999

Andhra Pradesh is one of the few states in India known for a substantial presence of communist-led movements. It shares this distinction with West Bengal, Kerala and Bihar. While the parliamentary communist parties are dominant in the first two states, AP and Bihar are known for their strong extraparliamentary armed communist movements.

The communist parties, be they parliamentary or armed, believe that it is their duty to take under their wing all movements for the redressal of popular grievances. They believe that they possess a theory that can help locate each popular grievance in its appropriate place in the social system, and thereby indicate its objective significance as distinct from (but subsuming) its subjective significance for the carriers of the grievance. They also believe that they have the requisite organisational theory to build a movement for its redressal that would make it part of the wider movement for social transformation, that is, the building of a society free from exploitation. The communists view with suspicion popular movements that do not accept their leadership, and insist that such movements prove strictly that they are not agents of the local or imperialist exploiting classes.

Nobody can deny that it is desirable from the long-term view of social transformation—and even in terms of the immediate requirement of mutual solidarity—that popular movements which take up diverse grievances should coordinate among themselves and evolve a common orientation. Oppressive social groups and the institutional instruments that aid them do form a coherent and (often) mutually reinforcing totality, though they may not constitute as solid a bloc as radical analysis frequently makes it seem. For this purpose, it is necessary for struggles against oppression also to coordinate among themselves as best as they can. The best way may not necessarily be under the leadership of a single (and that too a highly centralised) party. But nevertheless, the very necessity of coordination adds strength and legitimacy to the communist demand that all popular movements should merge with the political movement led by them, and thereby find their respective places within the strategic scheme adopted by the communists.

However, any such demand must exhibit a matching reciprocity: a theoretical intelligence and practical innovativeness that would respond quickly to popular aspirations (indeed, recognise them even while they are dormant and awaken them), and would organise the people in such a way that the satisfaction of the grievance is attempted as part of a wider transformative process. At the same time, however, the people who carry the grievance should not be allowed to feel that their aspirations are being 'used' for a strategy whose goal is either too abstract and remote for them to identify with, or whose link with the professed goal is not self-evident.

It is a known fact that the communist parties in India have lacked the practical innovativeness to attract a large variety of movements into their fold. This is not peculiar to India, though it can perhaps be said that Indian communists have exhibited, on the whole, less than normal innovativeness. Perhaps the highly centralised nature of the Bolshevik model that has become the norm of communist organisation is itself a hindrance to innovativeness, while it may certainly have virtues of a military nature. But does the communist movement have even the necessary theory, or at least the requisite capability for developing the necessary theory, and for undertaking the task of attracting all the grievances of the oppressed or exploited people in society by itself? The prospects of the communist movement in India await an answer to this question. A look at the recent popular movements and political trends that have surfaced in AP, bypassing all the communist formations from the mildest to the most violent, should provide some answers.

What immediately strikes the eye is that ever since the birth of the dalit movement in 1985, most of the social and political movements that have emerged in AP have been outside the communist fold. The two exceptions are the prisoners' struggle of 1994, which was initiated and led by the naxalite (principally the People's War Group) undertrials, and the mass campaign against armed landlord factions in Rayalaseema, which was taken

up by the CPI(ML) (Janashakthi). Since they were anti-state or anti-landlord struggles, they faced no theoretical obstacle to taking up these causes. What is remarkable is that all the other movements which emerged during this period were initiated by parties/organisations/persons other than the communists, and all of them were either wholly or partly of a nature other than anti-state, anti-landlord and anti-capitalist, though none of them was for any of these oppressive forces. The question is whether this indicates that merely theoretical innovativeness and practical creativity were lacking, or indeed something deeper was lacking.

None of these non-communist struggles has actually adopted an anti-communist stand, though many of them have been critical of communist theory and practice. The communists, for their part, have exhibited a range of responses to these movements: initial surprise that they did not know what was in the offing; followed by sometimes hostile and sometimes mild criticism of the movements' theory and practice, and offering of unsolicited advice about the same from the proclaimed vantage point of scientific social theory; not infrequent participation in solidarity struggles; and a perpetual warning to beware of co-optation by the ruling classes. In addition, the communists, and the naxalites, in particular, never tire of claiming credit for being the first in the state to legitimise radical questioning, thereby paving the way for other forms of radical questioning and activity. The claim is not without substance, but it is understandably found to be oppressive by the later protest movements, for their legitimacy is simultaneously belittled by charges of deviation, collaboration and co-optation.

Let us try to examine the reason as to why these later protest movements erupted outside the communist fold. The most talked about among these movements is the anti-arrack struggle of rural women. Communist parties are parties of men, to a much greater extent than they are parties of the nondalit castes. For men, discussion about drink turns around the notions of habit/morality/practicality of prohibition/power of the liquor business in the polity. Those who defend drinking describe it as an age-old personal habit; opposition to it is castigated as old-fashioned morality. The opposition to drinking is justified by their critics in the name of the popular expectation that communists should oppose a culture of self-indulgence, be it ancient or otherwise. And in any case (the argument finally ends) banning drink is impractical, since it has not been successful anywhere in the world. The growing importance of the liquor business and arrack contractors in AP politics was quickly noted and condemned, and its social and political consequences analysed, by the CPI(ML) parties as well as marxist intellectuals (including myself). All the communist parties have the rural labouring population as their mainstay, and all marxist intellectuals have the interests of the labouring (in particular, the rural) population at heart, without consideration of caste or sex, but yet it took an independent upsurge of women from the very same rural classes to alter the terms of discussion and focus on the violence and deprivation that the male addiction to drink entails for the women and the children they rear.

The CPI and CPI(M) showed little interest in even opposing the growth of corruption and violence in the wake of the increasing importance of the arrack business and arrack businessmen in the state's politics. The CPI's lack of interest was because quite a few of its own leaders are arrack businessmen, and that of the CPI(M) was because of its very close links with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which is much more than a mere electoral ally of the parliamentary left in the state, and which offers as congenial a political habitat for liquor businessmen as the Congress. But the CPI(ML) parties did take up a fight against what they understood as the plunder of the workers by the arrack contractors. The argument was that the contractor was robbing the poor worker and taking away much of his income by selling him drink. But the victim was often not very enthusiastic about the struggle, and, therefore, the struggle in which the male drink-addicted worker was seen as the victim was either forced into dormancy, or else it had to be taken up by terrorist means as the PWG did: individual armed militants would physically threaten or attack the arrack businessmen, burn down or blow up the shops, etc. It took a movement of the wives of these contrived victims to show who the true victims were. The worker presumably had a merry time getting drunk, even if that ate into his salary or wages, and rendered him that much poorer. But it was the women at home who suffered not only the deprivation as well as the violence that the drunken worker inflicted upon them, but also the added burden of putting up with the man's irresponsible attitude towards the management of the household. To his wife, he probably looked less like a victim and more like an accomplice of the liquor businessman in the violence and deprivation that she suffered.

The relevant question here is this: can a theoretical outlook which is accustomed to identifying the 'working class' with the totality of the (mostly male) workers who work outside the home, each of whom is taken to homogeneously represent his family, arrive at this viewpoint without denting its theory? The CPI(ML) parties, in a sense, have even less justification than the parliamentary communists for this blindness, for their mainstay has been the class of landless agricultural workers, many of whom are women,

but then their Rytu Coolie Sanghams[1] are practically all-male organisations, and, therefore, their political sense has not been substantially affected by the fact that their mainstay is the class of landless labourers of whom (even if one counts only those who are visible in the fields) many are women.

The way in which the CPI(ML) parties perceived the problem had a curious consequence. Since it was the drink-addicted worker who was seen as the victim of the liquor business, and the appropriation of his income by the arrack businessman was seen as the issue to be fought, the parties first fought for lowering the price of arrack. This rather ridiculous demand made their intellectual sympathisers vaguely uncomfortable. But it angered the women a lot. For it often meant that the man would drink more and trouble the women at home more with his violence and his drink-induced irresponsibility, even if overall he spent less on the drink. The parties realised the foolishness of their struggle after a couple of years, even if they did not comprehend what had theoretically impeded their view. Consequently, the struggle for total prohibition that they later undertook was ineffective where it was nonviolent, and an affair of individual hit-and-run terror where it was effective. It took a self-conscious movement of the rural women to set the perspective right. The question is: could it have been otherwise? For that would have meant broadening the notion of the working class to include the shadowy figures of the wage workers' families hiding behind them, and more importantly, accepting the existence of serious conflicts of interest within the family. The theoretical resistance to this is exemplified by the haste with which such a proposal invites the discussion as to whether the conflict of interest between men and women within patriarchy is irreconcilable or merely a 'friendly' contradiction.

Two other movements may be examined here to make a few more observations. One is the organised dalit movement, which is, in fact, the first of the recent popular movements that have bypassed the communist parties. Individual Ambedkarites and small Ambedkarite groups have existed in the state for a long time, but it was the birth of the AP Dalit Mahasabha in 1985 that signalled the birth of a mass dalit movement in the state. It began with a bang, inspiring thousands of dalits into activism in the coastal districts of AP. Today, the Dalit Mahasabha has split and is somewhat demoralised, but dalit activism and consciousness are as alive as ever. And they remain, by and large, outside the communist stream. Even among the CPI(ML) parties, the Janashakthi alone has tried to incorporate the dalit viewpoint to some extent in its worldview and thereby

[1] Farmers' and labourers' associations.

create space for dalit activism within its movement. But it is now facing many problems in effecting this incorporation.

Why is the dalit movement outside the communist stream? After all, it is not a movement of urban middle class dalits, but a mass movement of dalits with a firm foothold in the segregated settlements of the rural untouchables. These dalit masses include the landless workers or (at best) the poor peasant classes, which constitute the main support base of the communists, in particular the CPI(ML) parties. Nor has the dalit movement in AP adopted a hostile attitude towards the Backward Caste (BC) labourers who share the same class position as the dalits (though the BCs themselves may have exhibited misgivings about the organised self-assertion of the untouchables). And yet, the dalit movement has remained, at best, an uncomfortable friend of even the CPI(ML) parties, and, at worst, an unwelcome intruder suspected of consciously diverting the class struggles of the poor. Why is this so? And did it have to be so?

It was in the coastal districts of AP that the mass dalit movement of today started. Its rise has revealed the presence of a ferment, whose fundamentals were present in Telangana and Rayalaseema too, in those districts. It is now evident that a call for dalit self-assertion, based on a dalit identity, would have evoked a response in those districts. This was not so evident to the communist parties and to marxist intellectuals (including myself) until the Karamchedu massacre took place and gave birth to a mass dalit movement in whose formation a few perceptive dalit intellectuals played a central role. But what is the reason? The CPI and CPI(M) have a significant presence in the coastal districts of AP, but while much of their following is among the rural poor, it is mostly a passive 'support base', which is mobilised for voting at election time, and for exhibition at conference time. The local leadership of these parties, however, is mostly in the hands of the upper caste middle or rich farmers, whose sincerity in espousing the economic interests of the poor need not be doubted (though these days even this is doubted by the poor), but whose understanding or tolerance of dalit self-assertion is extremely suspect. The CPI(ML) parties have never had much of a mass base among the people in the coastal districts of the state. Irrespective of whatever be the organisational reasons for this, their view of mass struggles has certainly militated against it. Theirs is a framework of militant class struggle against feudal oppression and extreme economic exploitation. They could not expect to gain a foothold in the coastal districts wherein feudal domination of the Telangana type is non-existent, and while poverty is a reality, there is little destitution. Work is available, and wages are not inconsiderable. A

movement for social respect and dignity, and for upward mobility within the existing economy and polity, while breaking the barriers of caste, would have been possible. Since the respect and dignity were denied, and the opportunities blocked, primarily on grounds of caste, the movement would have to be based on the dalit identity and not the communist notion of the working class. This shift in perception was necessary before any popular movement of the oppressed masses could break out in the coastal districts.

Would such a shift have been possible for the communists, within communist theory? A movement for self-respect and dignity, considered as a 'superstructural' though important question, and limited mainly to the question of untouchability, would have been possible, but it would have had to be an adjunct to a 'basic' class movement. Considered by itself, it would not have been perceived as an issue that could constitute the principal focus of political struggle, though, depending on the sensitivity of the leadership, varying degrees of importance could be accorded to the 'superstructural' question of untouchability, even while it remained 'superstructural'. It cannot be denied that communists have led anti-untouchability struggles at various points of time. But there is a world of difference between taking up the issue of dalit self-respect and dignity in the form of only an anti-untouchability campaign, and that too as an adjunct to a 'class struggle', on the one hand, and taking it up as a basic issue of social revolution or democratisation, on the other. The difference becomes even clearer when we move to the second aspect of the contemporary dalit movement, that is, the struggle of dalits to break the caste barriers to their upward mobility within the existing economy and polity. This does not, by any means, preclude a critical attitude towards the existing economic and political relations, but the engagement with this particular struggle, be it along with or independent of a struggle against the dominant economic and political systems, is a necessary and legitimate chapter in the struggle for social transformation. Here, however, communist theory encounters a basic difficulty. There is little room in that theory for any respect for the desire to move up in the capitalist economy and the bourgeois–democratic political system. Such a desire is delegitimised as being inherently individualist, because it is not possible for every individual, and if it finds expression within the working class, it is dubbed as a petty-bourgeois illusion or weakness. While it may be tolerated in an individual, a whole political movement that emphasises this goal (whether exclusively or along with other goals) would not be granted transformative legitimacy, much less engendered by communists. Communist theory treats the economy as the fundamental fact of social life, and the political system as its principal superstructural agent and protector. A movement one of whose main goals is the desire to help a section of the toiling masses (which is what the dalits are perceived as, from the working class viewpoint) move up in these spheres is incurably reformist, illusory and petty-bourgeois. One could maintain a cautious and tactful (or tactical) silence towards such movements if the situation demands, for the communist movement is not without its sense of realism in politics, but the theoretical tension remains. The problem can be resolved by nothing short of according a 'basic' status to caste, at least on par with economic relations, and then the theoretical difficulty arises as to how one should reconcile two 'basic' relations placed side by side and interacting with each other, within the base–superstructure model of communist theory. What this implies is that there are fundamental theoretical reasons as to why the communist movement could not have been the progenitor of the dalit movement. Of course, this does not explain why the communist leadership could not see this theoretical difficulty and try to come to terms with it. The reason for this is undoubtedly that much of the communist leadership, and much more so the marxist intelligentsia, has till now belonged to the upper or at least the savarna[2] castes, and, therefore, has had no personal experience of the humiliation of untouchability and the social handicap of being a dalit.

Marxist theory is familiar with class-in-itself and class-for-itself. It is accepted that it is not sufficient for the working class to be constituted objectively as a class (by the relations of production). It must feel, think and respond subjectively as a class. From 'they', it must become 'we'. What is the reason for making this distinction? The working class can be liberated from exploitation only after it achieves self-discovery. It must be preceded by the workers' discovery of their own identity, and the dignity, strength and value that proceed therefrom.

The assertion of identities—of dalits, tribals and women—should be seen to possess tremendous value from this point of view. Unfortunately, the communists have, in practice, been more concerned with safeguarding the objective unity of the working class—to which the politics of caste, tribe and gender is seen as a hindrance—than in engendering a subjective sense of worth and dignity among the oppressed. Within the caste system and within patriarchal family relations, the toiling and oppressed people are not oppressed as 'workers' in the abstract, but as potters, dhobis or

[2] Communities that belong to one of the four varnas in the Hindu varna system—brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas and sudras. Dalits and adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) do not belong to the varna system and are considered as avarna.

barbers, and as women. The rediscovery of their own worth and dignity, therefore, takes place most naturally through these identities.

The women's movement, the dalit movement, and the subsequent emergence of forums of individual toiling ('backward') communities, can be seen and appreciated from this angle. For the first time—and after many decades of honest and dedicated communist organisation—each section of the oppressed people is discovering for itself what it is and what it can be. If communist theory were not obsessed with the objective category of class under which all self-assertion of the oppressed must be instantly subsumed, and if it accorded significance to the more important process of self-discovery of the oppressed, it would have learnt to see this assertion as a valuable advance. Instead, these assertions, which are obsessed with the theoretical category of class, are seen to be dominated by a micro-elite among the petty-bourgeoisie of those communities, ready to be co-opted into ruling class politics. Of course, the following question must be posed: will this assertion eventually lead to a politics of liberation for all people from all forms of oppression? Within marxist theory, this question is rephrased as follows: will this assertion eventually lead to the formation of working class consciousness? It is this rephrasing that gives rise to the perpetual unease that afflicts communists about the possibility of the co-optation of the 'elites' (such as they are) of these communities by the ruling classes. But if alternative modes of realising the goal of liberation from oppression can be conceived, the unease loses its seeming objectivity. And yet there will be critiques of the possible limitations of this politics. Even in the advanced capitalist countries, the differentiation wrought by modern-day capitalism within the working class, as well as the categories of gender and ethnicity that are not reducible to class, have made the primacy of class a questionable assumption. In Third World countries, and especially in India, which has a well-entrenched system of social stratification based upon caste, capitalism is unlikely to take as comprehensive a form as it has in the West, and, therefore, class is never likely to become as important a mode of being as in the West.

Two final examples would serve to illustrate the points highlighted above. The madiga[3] movement for categorisation of Scheduled Caste reservations has thrown up a question equally for the communists and the dalit organisations. Neither of them could have perceived the genuine grievances of the madigas even if they knew of the existence of the disparity, for that would mean dividing a seemingly united force (the rural landless labourers in the case of the communists, and the dalits in the case of the dalit movement), whose united strength was the base from which an assault on the dominant structures was to be led. It, therefore, required the self-assertion of the madigas to make the movement possible. But at the end, what one finds is not only that a genuine (sectional) demand has been realised, but that the 'section' in question is now more conscious, more assertive and more aware of its own dignity and worth. This should actually be an asset for any transformative movement, but the notion of a single and solidly united force from which an assault upon the system has to be launched seems to be contradicted by this development.

It is true, on the one hand, that the total fragmentation of rebel movements into mutually hostile or indifferent efforts would dampen the overall transformative potential of popular movements. It is nobody's wish that it should be so. What seems to be required are 'localised' (both spatially and socially) movements that are specific enough to bring out the full potential and engender the full self-realisation of various oppressed groups, subsequently federated into a wider movement that can (in a free and democratic way) channelise the aroused energies into a broad movement. This is quite different from the leninist notion of a single vanguard party that would centralise all knowledge within itself and direct (top down) the struggles of the suppressed masses. In such an effort, the suppressed masses would not be even half awakened to their potential. Even if such a party were to claim that it learns from the people, and even if were to honestly try to do so, the very strategy would be inadequate. If there can at all be a single 'party' which would lead a movement for social transformation, it can only be a federally structured organisation, whose free and equal units would be the basic political units, centred on the self-directed struggles of various sections of the deprived. But as long as the capture of (or smashing of) state power, and the solid unity of the social base that it requires, is the strategic driving force of the party organisation, the federated structure that can fully release the energies of the people cannot be realised. This contradiction is insurmountable only to the extent that 'state power' is central to the task of social transformation. If its importance is downgraded from the present centrality that it has in marxist thought, and shown a lower but appropriate place, the contradiction could be overcome.

The final example is the recent tribal struggle in West Godavari district. All the communist parties without exception have a following among tribals in AP. All of them have led some struggles for the benefit of the tribals. The tribals of the state have been enjoying access to a large quantity of forest

[3] A dalit community found mainly in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

land with communist—especially naxalite—help. And yet, the first major struggle against occupation of tribal land by non-tribals has come under a totally independent leadership. Indeed, if one leaves out the initial inspiration given by the voluntary organisation, Shakthi, it may be said that the recent tribal struggle for strict implementation of the Land Transfer Regulation Act[4] is a struggle of, for and by the tribals.

The tenacity of the struggle has taken all the communist parties by surprise. And it has given rise to the question as to why the parties have never succeeded in conducting an equally tenacious struggle for protecting tribal land from encroachment by non-tribals in their own tribal strongholds. Much of the communist-led tribal struggle has been an anti-state struggle, aimed at asserting the right of cultivation in state-owned forest land. This is fully in keeping with communist strategy centred on political struggle against the state. It was also perhaps felt by the communists that taking up a struggle against non-tribal encroachers on a major scale would pit the tribals against the non-tribal poor, which would be prejudicial to the requirement of unity among the toiling classes. The independent tribal struggle has not been aimed at the non-tribal poor. The tribals are quite sympathetic towards them. Yet that has not precluded a determined struggle for restoration of land alienated from the tribals. The guarantees to the non-tribal poor would come at the end and not at the beginning, as with a strategy of unity of the toiling masses conceived as the solid base for an assault on the state.

However, the practical upshot has been a tremendous self-assertion of the tribals; the growth of a sense of dignity and worth; the development of leaders from within the tribe, both among the men and women; a greater awareness of their own culture, language and history; and the growth of the confidence that they can do anything. Of course, this is not absent in communist-led struggles of tribals for forest land, for the change in consciousness wrought by communist-led struggles is a legend in itself. But the feeling that they are masters of their own destiny, which a self-directed movement of the oppressed brings about, is all that and something more. The gap that soon develops between the movement and the masses, in movements organised as part of a bigger political strategy, limits the self-development of the masses. In the case of the naxalites, whose accent is on violent militancy, this gap develops even faster, for militancy is always the attribute of a minority.

[4] This Act was intended to regulate the transfers of land in the Fifth Schedule areas of AP. It contains express provisions which state that tribal land cannot be alienated to non-tribals.

Caste and Civil Rights

Bangalore, 9 May 1996

I have been asked to speak[1] on caste as a civil rights issue or caste and civil rights. I am general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), an organisation, which in its manifesto, in its aims and objectives, has included opposition to caste domination as one of the major areas of activity. The agenda of the APCLC is not confined to just fact-finding when dalits are assaulted by upper caste persons or trying to get cases filed and so on, but taking up the issue of caste itself as a civil rights question, which takes us well beyond merely opposing atrocities on dalits.

This understanding is not something that the APCLC had from the beginning. The organisation was formed in 1973, and in its initial manifesto its framework did not really include notions such as either caste, patriarchy or secularism as part of its concerns. It was only during the course of activity, the course of experience, especially the course of reacting to and responding to situations as well as questions posed by society when one is talking of civil rights, that the organisation gradually expanded its activity and understanding. And it was in 1991, eighteen years after the organisation was born, that we discussed and amended our constitution in our general body, and included the clause that we would regard caste both as a social

[1] Transcript of the lecture delivered at a meeting organised by the People's Democratic Front in Bangalore on 9 May 1996.

system and as a culture, as by itself and in itself a civil rights problem. This implies that the very existence of caste as a system and as a culture signifies a denial of democratic rights and civil rights, and we will take it into our domain of functioning. It also implies that irrespective of what we have been doing, and irrespective of the framework of activity we have when we talk of state violence, when we talk of undemocratic legislations like TADA[2] or NSA,[3] when we talk of industrial pollution and so on, within that framework and with those aims, we will also try to function towards achieving the ultimate goal of annihilation of caste. I will try to elucidate this, try to give this content. I will do this both from the point of view of the concrete experience of the APCLC and from a more general viewpoint.

There is no point in merely discussing this abstractly. In particular, why is it that a large number of civil rights organisations in India even today do not regard caste as a civil rights issue? Many of them are very uncomfortable when we say that the APCLC is taking up this issue. As far as investigating atrocities on dalits is concerned, I think most people have been taking it up as an activity. But we find that many civil rights organisations are not willing to go beyond that and consider caste itself as a human rights problem. And they feel quite uncomfortable when the issue is raised. In fact, I had a strange experience in the beginning, a peculiar experience. When one starts viewing caste as a social institution, and its impact on all other social institutions—that is, how it perverts the democratic content of every institution—one develops a certain way of looking at things. I was in Calcutta once as a guest of the local civil rights organisation, the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), and they had a case going on in the high court. So I just went there and I was sitting with them. They were complaining about the judge. The case was about the custodial killing of a rickshaw-puller or somebody, and they were commenting that the judge is a little negative, not very sensitive, and so on. We were sitting behind. I casually asked the secretary of that organisation, 'What is the judge's caste?' I thought it was relevant. Since he was saying that the judge is prejudiced, and has a negative attitude, I thought his caste was relevant. But that friend got very upset. He said, 'Why do you ask the caste of the judge? He is a judge, he doesn't have a caste.' He is a judge all right, but he does have a caste. That man refused to even answer what the caste of the judge could be, though one can easily guess the caste of a person from his name if one is a local person.

[2] The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) was an extremely harsh and unpopular legislation that was enacted by the Indian parliament in 1985. It was allowed to lapse in 1995 following widespread allegations of abuse.

[3] The National Security Act, 1980.

Background of the Civil Rights Movement

One needs to understand why this is so. Why is there this kind of a resistance? I think one also needs to study the background of the present civil rights movement in India. I think that the existing civil rights organisations and movements in India had their origin in two kinds of political contexts, which developed in the early 1970s. By about the late 1960s and 1970s, I think there was a general disillusionment in the country with the establishment politics identified with the Congress party and all kinds of alternatives were coming forward. And though the Communist party had made several attempts earlier to form civil rights organisations, especially whenever it was subjected to repression, it was within the context of this nationwide disillusionment that it floated civil rights forums, which existed as long as the repression did, and then they closed down. This happened very frequently. Similarly, every political formation that faced repression formed a civil rights organisation of its own. There was a Hindu Civil Rights Union in Hyderabad when the Razakar[4] attacks were perpetrated not only on Hindus but also on those Muslims who differed from the Nizam of Hyderabad. The Arya Samaj established a Hindu Civil Rights Organisation in Hyderabad. Subsequently, it became defunct after Hyderabad became part of India. Such efforts did take place earlier. But after 1970, a series of civil rights organisations were established, which have continued to exist to this day. And for this history, there are two political contexts. One is the Bihar movement of students and youth led by or guided by Jayaprakash Narayan[5] against Mrs Gandhi's corruption and despotism, and her henchmen in Bihar. That movement was suppressed very violently by Congress governments. I think 200 to 300 students and youth died in police fire during a short period in various towns of Bihar. Since the leader or the guiding light of that movement was Jayaprakash Narayan, and Justice Tarkunde[6] has always been close to Jayaprakash

[4] A Muslim militia organised by Qasim Rizvi of Ittehadul Muslimeen to support the rule of Osman Ali Khan and resist the integration of the Hyderabad princely state into the Union of India.

[5] Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–79) was the leader who galvanised people against the authoritarianism of prime minister Indira Gandhi who went on to impose Emergency (1975–77) and incarcerated Narayan in 1976.

[6] Justice V.M. Tarkunde (1909–2004) was a prominent lawyer, a radical humanist, and the founding president of the People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCLDR).

Narayan, that was the context in which Justice Tarkunde came forward and gave a call for creating a civil rights movement. Usually when students and youth come into the streets to fight corrupt and despotic governments, the state reacts by sending in the paramilitary and shooting them down and using various oppressive legislations against them. And that was the genesis of what is today the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). I think the year of the organisation's birth was 1974.[7] Its political context was the JP-led movement in Bihar and partly Gujarat, and the concerns it gave rise to in terms of civil rights. The movement itself was a wider political movement launched as part of a search for an alternative to the Congress party. But the suppression it was subjected to gave rise to a strong civil rights concern among the activists led by Mr Tarkunde, and then the PUCL was born and, of course, since then, it has been taking up a wide range of issues. This is one political context.

The other political context is, of course, the naxalite uprising, which began in Bengal, and spread to Bihar and Andhra Pradesh thereafter. And the response of the governments was not to answer the social and economic questions raised by that movement, nor to remedy the socio-economic situations highlighted by that movement but to suppress it violently. Encounters between the police and the naxalites have been continuing till today in AP and also in Bihar. And preventive detention laws were used very extensively against the naxalites. The criminal conspiracy sections of the Indian criminal law were also extensively misused in the context of the naxalite movement. All political activity, even a meeting like this, could be called a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the state, and all people present could be booked and put in jail. This again gave rise to a civil rights concern, that in dealing with this political movement, which was an armed struggle with the aims of the communist theory, the state was using thoroughly undemocratic methods, extrajudicial execution, what used to be called black laws, and so on. Consequently, civil rights organisations were formed in West Bengal and AP. The APCLC was one such organisation. Subsequently, as time progressed, other organisations also took shape in various parts of the country.

These two streams, which have led to the present civil rights movement in India, have a philosophical and ideological background. The first one may loosely be called liberal democracy though it is difficult to pinpoint it to Jayaprakash Narayan and Tarkunde's outlook as such, but basically it can be placed within a broad framework that one may call liberal democracy. The second is the marxist framework. Both these frameworks have their specific points and perhaps specific limitations too. Because of the nature of these frameworks, the civil rights movement took up certain concerns as basic concerns, a few other concerns as secondary concerns, and certain others as not concerns at all. That's how it came about.

When we look back at our organisation's original manifesto, the following questions arise: what is that which was defined as a civil rights issue? Or what is it that was identified as the context from which a civil rights problem would arise? That was the suppression of workers and peasants by the state, by the capitalists and by the landlords. This is the framework which was laid down for identifying civil rights problems in the APCLC's original manifesto. Therefore, you have workers and peasants identified as economic categories, and class categories, with their aspirations and assertions suppressed by capitalists, landlords and the state. And from this suppression arise a variety of civil rights problems. We thus had about an eight-point statement of aims and objects for the APCLC within this context, which clearly stems from a marxist concept. A similar process ensued in the case of the PUCL. I have not seen their manifesto, but if one assesses their initial activity—not subsequent or present activity but initial activity—one can see that it was concerned with institutions of parliamentary democracy, the judiciary, and lawlessness of the police force. Again, many of these concerns may partly become the concerns of the framework within which the APCLC, APDR and Organisation for Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR) and other organisations took birth.

What is remarkable is that none of these frameworks had a place for caste as a basic civil rights issue. There is no reason why the civil rights movement in India should have taken birth in only this way. It could have happened differently. But it so happened that these were the contexts which gave rise to the civil rights concern in India; though much before this, certain basic concepts, which I and many others think are at least the APCLC's concepts today, were formulated by Ambedkar, for instance, when he was talking of democracy. One point that he reiterated often was that as long as caste exists, there cannot be democracy, because a society which is ridden by caste can never become a democratic society.

Now, this could have been the starting point of a civil rights movement but it did not happen for a variety of reasons. I am sure one important reason for this is that it is usually the upper caste persons—upper caste liberal democratic minded progressive people—who are the first to initiate

[7] Jayaprakash Narayan, Tarkunde, Krishna Kant and other followers of Jayaprakash Narayan founded the People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights—PUCLDR—to complement the work of Citizens for Democracy (CFD). After Jayaprakash Narayan's death and post-Emergency, PUCLDR was rechristened as PUCL in November 1980.

a civil rights movement, and since none of them had experienced either untouchability or any kind of caste oppression and none of them had direct contacts, or a direct ideological or political sympathy with the anticaste movements, like the Republican Party of India, they would obviously not engender an anticaste movement. Therefore, the civil rights movement that they created took shape within different frameworks. While those frameworks also had their own history and their own logic, that logic, for a variety of reasons, did not have a place for caste as a civil rights issue.

Denial of Civic Status

That's how things stood. But when we examine the issue closely, we start asking more questions. For instance, state violence is very commonly taken up as a major issue by civil rights organisations. But why do we oppose state violence? Why do we oppose undemocratic legislation? Why do we oppose all this when we take up these issues? These things gradually throw up a lot of questions. If we give one answer to a question and that answer has certain logical implications which go beyond itself, we are also forced to take all those logical implications into consideration. At the time I was new to the APCLC, people used to often ask, 'Is not untouchability a major civil rights issue? Why is it not there in your manifesto?' After all, what does untouchability do? What does caste in general do?' It denies civic status, and civic status is the beginning of civil rights. If we talk of policemen torturing somebody in a police station, we are presuming that the person is a subject who has civic status. Somebody who has been tortured is a person who already possesses the status of a civilian. Somebody who is being arrested under the National Security Act already possesses a status of a civilian.

That civic status is presumed whenever we talk about civil liberties. But caste is something that by its very nature denies civil status itself. It implies that the person being discriminated against on the basis of caste is not an equal citizen, that his civil status is, for instance, half of mine, or one part of mine, or one-tenth of mine. With the prevalence of this kind of a system, how is it that the concern for civil rights does not take up caste itself as a civil rights issue? This is a question that was frequently asked by persons with an Ambedkarite viewpoint, and many of us would feel uncomfortable, because some answer needed to be given. And within the framework that we were accustomed to, we would say that these are not questions that a civil rights movement can answer, that only a social transformation can bring about the changes, and that we would help protect the rights of those who are fighting for social transformation. This was the standard answer that we used to give in the beginning—that only a social transformation can get rid off caste, and we cannot do anything individually to get rid of caste. And, therefore, our task is to ensure the protection of the political rights of those who are fighting for social transformation, and this protection becomes the civil rights cause.

But this was not a really satisfactory answer, partly because when we talk about, say, encounters or lock-up deaths, we are unable to put an end to these episodes. In a sense that is also something which cannot be achieved through the civil rights movement, but we are still trying to do so. Why are we doing it? When we take up any civil rights issue as part of the civil rights movement, it is never presumed that we would be able to find a solution to the issue. All that we aim to do and have been able to achieve, to an extent, is to create awareness about it, to create a democratic critique about it, to impart confidence and the purpose to fight to the affected people, and if possible, to create institutions and an institutional culture that would mitigate the evils of those undemocratic institutions and oppression. This is all that the civil rights movement has been able to do in any context. So why cannot it do the same thing about caste too, instead of saying that only social transformation would get rid of caste, and that in the meantime, we would talk only about state violence?

We cannot even get rid of state violence. But still why are we talking about it? This was the debate that we used to frequently engage in. Although it is true that by campaigning against untouchability or against encounters we are not going to get rid of them. So, what have we been able to do through our campaigns? We have been able to achieve a few things. One is to create awareness that extrajudicial killing cannot be permitted in a civilised society. Regardless of whatever crime somebody has committed, he has to be tried according to the law, and he cannot be taken away and shot dead. This is an awareness that we have been able to create. We have also been able to create a certain amount of confidence in people that what we are propagating is right and that we should stand up for it. We have also been able to form a general democratic critique of police excesses, and highlighted the need for improving institutions and institutional cultures. Like, for instance, when we function in courts, using a court for civil liberties purposes also improves the functioning of the courts and makes them more of civil rights forums, even if merely to the extent of 1 per cent or 2 per cent or 5 per cent. But while we have been able to generate such awareness and initiate such action where state violence is concerned, why have we not been able to achieve the same where other civil rights issues are concerned? This was the debate that we constantly had.

Today, I am able to formulate or express this issue clearly but it was

never so clear in the beginning. When I look back at what Ambedkar said from this point of view, that what is remarkable about Hindu society is not that it is stratified, as all societies are stratified, but that it is stratified much more absolutely than other societies. But I think that the most significant part of Hinduism is that whereas every religion has sanctioned inequality by various means, by offering various ideological explanations for it, Hinduism alone has said that God himself has created inequality, and that we cannot do anything about it. None of the other religions has said that God himself has created people unequal. They have defended inequality by various other means, by various mechanisms and devices. Hinduism alone says, or makes God himself say in the Bhagavad Gita, that He has created people unequal, and that there is nothing anyone can do about it. After all, in medieval society, God plays the role that the Constitution and the law play in an ideal modern liberal society. And if God himself declares that people are unequal by birth, by creation, by His will, that acts as a very powerful justification for inequality, as it entrenches itself into the minds of people. This denial of civil status as a fundamental thing is a very remarkable quality of Hinduism. Today, I think that any civil rights concern in India should start with this issue. It can move on to other things subsequently, because after all historically, the first civil rights question which came up, at least after civilised society took birth in India, is the question of caste. Subsequently, we got a modern state after the advent of the Britishers, and thereafter, we started facing the problems of the modern state's authoritarianism, which is common in the Western countries and in other nations.

We have also seen the development of capitalism, which has created the problems of labour, economic exploitation and deprivation of livelihood for the people, thereby leading to other problems. But in this country, the lack of democracy began with caste and patriarchy, which are part of the same development. In fact, in Hindu society, it is difficult to divide patriarchy from caste because if we look at the Dharmashastras, we find that the two are totally intertwined. It is very difficult to talk about the domination of men over women without bringing the issue of caste into the question, and its very difficult to talk about caste without bringing the domination of men over women into the question, as the two are intertwined. Therefore, I think that today, if we have to talk of a civil rights concern in India, it should begin with brahminical Hinduism, and the context that it has defined. This is the point Ambedkar made long ago and it is quite true that it has remained outside the understanding of the civil rights movement, and the reason for this is definitely that all of us who initiated the movement belong

to the upper castes. It is only today that the Backward Caste and dalit intellectuals are coming forward into the civil rights movement. That process has begun only recently.

If the issue is perceived in this manner, we realise that a society which denies civil status to certain individuals as a matter of theory, as a matter of principle, as a matter of philosophy, as a matter of religion, can never become democratic until that division is annihilated, and completely eradicated. I think that this realisation must become central to the understanding of what the civil rights movement has to achieve. The objective of the civil rights movement cannot be reduced to only fighting state violence but must encompass the issue of caste too so that the political parties or organisations which want to fight for a better society are enabled to do so. Those who want to fight for a better society must have political rights and we must defend their political rights. But that cannot be the only task of the civil rights movement of today and as per the APCLC's understanding of it, we need to outline a broader framework for ourselves. And that task is to define democracy not merely in terms of police misbehaviour and police atrocities but in a much wider sense—political, administrative, social, economic, and familial—to define it widely and try to build ideas about democracy, a democratic critique of the existing institutions and cultures, the willpower, the self-confidence and the courage required to fight these things, and the institutions, institutional culture, and institutional norms which may be able to either overcome or mitigate these things. This should be the framework of the civil rights movement. When one understands things in this way—by assuming that democracy should be part of the social, political, administrative and economic framework of society—caste becomes a very important part of the understanding of the civil rights issue. The agitation or fight against caste from the civil rights point of view then acquires many dimensions other than merely opposing atrocities on dalits. As regards atrocities on dalits, as far as I know all civil rights organisations in India are investigating them, and trying to get cases booked and to help the victims. That is fine. But if we understand caste itself as a central civil rights question as we ought to, the concern should go beyond merely investigating such atrocities.

I would like to point out a few such cases so that hopefully, in future, these issues can be taken up. But more importantly, I would like to recount the history of our own realisation of these issues, because we did not arrive at this realisation fast enough. For a long time, that is until 1984 or 1985, we were concerned with a single-point agenda, as indicated in the volume of the APCLC's initial reports, some copies of which have also been sent to

the People's Democratic Front (PDF). That single-point agenda was that the communist revolutionaries are fighting for social transformation and that their rights are being suppressed. They are being killed in fake encounters, being arrested, charged with false cases of conspiracy cases and so on, and that we were agitating against that. That used to be our only framework. We would never talk about other undemocratic aspects of public life or private life in our society. We would regard that as something which would be achieved only after a revolution and that in the meantime, we would fight only for the rights of revolutionaries. We never wrote it down this way, but that was the understanding that we commonly had. But then gradually, other issues came up that we needed to face and provide answers for. This is how our own understanding of the caste issue developed.

The Karamchedu Massacre

I think that the starting point of this understanding of the new framework for civil rights concerns was the massacre of dalits in Karamchedu [on 17 July 1985], a village in the Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, when N.T. Rama Rao was the chief minister of the state. His close relatives, and his son-in-law are from that village; that fellow,[8] who is now with Lakshmi Parvathi,[9] is one of the leaders of that party, and is also a member of the Rajya Sabha—those were the people who killed six dalits in Karamchedu.[10] Today, such an issue would have been projected as atrocities against the dalits, but in those days, when the incident actually occurred, it was not projected as such even in the common press. Instead, the projection was that Congress voters had been killed, that the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had killed these people because they were Congress voters. But it was obvious that after all, every Congress voter is not being killed, and that they had been killed not only because they were Congress voters but also because they were dalits. They were dalits in a village controlled by very powerful kamma landlords, very rich people who are involved in the Madras film business and all other kinds of things. For the first time, The APCLC as an organisation went on a fact-finding exercise for an issue other than that of police atrocities. We just went to Karamchedu. Frankly, we ourselves did not understand why we were going there as this is something we had

[8] The reference here is to Daggubati Venkateswara Rao, as of 2011 a Congress MLA. His father Daggubati Chenchuramaiah, prime accused in the 1984 Karamchedu massacre, was shot dead by a People's War Group squad. Venkateswara Rao's wife D. Purandeswari is the current union minister for state for human resources development.

[9] N.T. Rama Rao's second wife.

[10] See 'The Karamchedu Killings' in Section I of this volume.

never done in the past. We simply went there, we collected information, we held a press conference in Vijayawada, gave a press release, said that all the assailants must be immediately arrested, and then we came back. We did not fully understand why we had done this. But we did it. After all, the mutual killing by Congress people and TDP people takes place in AP very frequently. AP is a much more violent state than Karnataka. Not only the naxalites, but everybody else indulges in violence in AP. Yet, we had never taken up those issues earlier, and we did so for the first time in Karamchedu.

Then, after I came back, while I was still teaching in Warangal, one of my students, who was a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), deliberately came up to me and said, 'Sir, you have done a very good thing, I saw your statement in the papers; those kammas are very bad, they have killed these harijans [the term 'dalit' was not used in those days]; it's very good [that] you have gone there. In our village, harijans have killed a reddy; you [must] come [there too] for fact-finding.' Deliberately, he asked if I would come and I said no, I would not.

At that time, I did not know why I had answered like that. I just said that I would not. He asked me why. Then I said, and I remember my answer, 'You reddys, you have connections in the police, so if you are killed, you go and file a police complaint, the police will come and arrest them. In the case of harijans, they don't have police connections, so they can't file a police complaint, and the police will not help them.' I think in the beginning our understanding of why we had taken up issues of atrocities against the dalits was that the dalits do not have access to police help, while the upper castes have this access, and since we are concerned with police atrocities, the issue is that the police are helping one section, and not helping the other section (the dalits), which is why we have to step in and take up these issues of the killing of dalits by upper castes. But I think, very soon, we realised that this was a very artificial way of looking at the problem.

The question here actually is one of power. Some people have power, while others do not. We are concerned about state violence because the state has power over our lives. And that power has to be accountable. I mean we hope that ultimately there would be no power in society. But as long as power is there, it has to be accountable, not only to the public at large, but also to certain laid-down norms, which we call democratic principles, democratic norms, the law, or whatever else one wants to call it. This applies to everything. The state has to be accountable to democracy, to democratic norms. The owner of a factory, though he is a private citizen, also has to be accountable when he deals with his workers—to the law, to democratic norms, to democratic principles, to the basic livelihood rights

of the workers. Similarly, this also applies in the case of caste. Caste accords power to the upper castes, and that power, therefore, equally becomes a civil rights concern just as state power becomes a civil rights concern. Similarly, a man in a family has power over the women, whether as a husband, as a father, or even as a brother. This power should also be accountable to democratic principles. Ultimately, power should go, and there should be equality, but this can be achieved only through a process, and in that process, we need to hold that power accountable to certain principles.

Our effort is to weaken that power, to try to get rid of that power, to question the legitimacy of that power. Various questions come to mind in this context—Why should that power be there? Why should caste be there? Why should domination of men over women be there? Well, this becomes a civil rights question as much as questioning the power of the state is. This is something that we did not understand in the beginning and came to understand only over a period of time. One major issue which came up during those days concerned the institution of a Backward Class Commission called the Muralidhar Rao Commission when NTR was chief minister. Muralidhar Rao submitted a report saying that reservation for BCs in the state sector should be increased from 26 per cent to 44 per cent.

The report led to a big furore in the state. Upper caste students, especially those who belonged to NTR's caste, the kamma community, came out into the streets and all over coastal AP. They indulged in massive road-*roko* agitations, while the policemen would not even touch them, let alone arrest them. It led to a very volatile situation. The issue became a question mark for the APCLC. What were we supposed to do? Should we have seen it as a student agitation against government policy? If yes, we had to express concern about the rights of those students. Even otherwise, if the students were to be lathi-charged or shot down unnecessarily, we would have to take it up as an issue.

But should we see it basically as a student agitation against the policy of the government or as exhibition of upper caste arrogance? How were we to see it? We had this debate for a long time in our organisation, but we were not able to clinch the issue one way or the other. Some of us believed that this should not to be treated primarily as a student movement but as an exhibition of upper caste arrogance, and had to be criticised from that point of view, though we had to defend their right to take out a rally or hold a meeting, and so on. But the content of their demands was undemocratic, rather anti-democratic, and had to be opposed as a democratic principle. Some of us pointed out that though we were the main office-bearers of the APCLC, we could not even publish a pamphlet in those days. So, we brought out 10,000 pamphlets in the name of a Reservations Protection Committee, and distributed them in the state without using the name of the APCLC. Such was the situation in those days. Earlier, we had already taken up the issues of atrocities on dalits, but at the time, we did not fully understand why we had taken them up. When this situation arose, we did not understand what to do.

Gradually the understanding developed—incident by incident, event by event—that caste is a form of power, a form of authority, a form of domination which is built into the social structure, just as the power and domination of the state is built into our society, and social and political structure. Wherever power is exercised, the question of rights automatically comes in, irrespective of the source of that power. This source can be the Constitution, it can be social, or it can be cultural. Wherever power is exercised in an institutionalised way, the question of civil rights arises. It arises in different forms in different contexts. When it is a question of domination over women by men in the family, it arises in one form. When it is a question of caste domination, the form is different. When it is a question of domination of a policeman over the locality wherein he is the sub-inspector of police, it arises in yet another form. Basically, therefore, the question is one of power, and how civil rights need to be protected in the face of an unfair exercising of this power.

As I said, we developed this understanding only gradually. By the time the Mandal Commission[11] report came, we had no difficulty in taking a stand and initiating a widespread campaign in defence of the commission, in opposing whatever arguments were being advanced by the upper caste sections denigrating the Mandal Commission, and against reservation. I want to emphasise that today, just as many ideas emerging from the liberal tradition and from the marxist tradition have become part of the understanding of the civil rights movement, many thoughts of Ambedkar too need to become a part of this movement. One of the special qualities of Ambedkar was that he opposed the Hindu caste system not only as a dalit but also as a democrat. Very often, Ambedkar's ideas are presented as the ideas of a dalit intellectual fighting caste. That, of course, is true. But beyond that, he has to be seen as one of the greatest democrats of India, a person who was thoroughly and completely convinced about the need for implementing the best democratic principles in the country, which have come from the European Enlightenment and European democratic revolution. One can find that critique in Ambedkar frequently. These two

[11] See 'This Anti-Mandal Mania' in Section IV of this volume.

aspects of his character mingle when he writes. Thus, in his writings we can perceive both a dalit's critique of the caste system as well as a democrat's critique of an undemocratic system. The two merge very neatly and very smoothly. And that dual critique seen in Ambedkar has to inspire a holistic understanding of the civil rights movement because until and unless caste as a system, caste as a culture, caste as a complex of social relations, is totally annihilated, there cannot be democracy in India.

We can go on having elections, as they have to be held—I am not denigrating them. There has to be some mode of political expression whereby people choose their leaders. I mean even one goonda is pitched against another, even the fact that the people have a choice between the two is a good thing. Hopefully, a non-goonda will emerge on the electoral scene one day or the other. So I am not denigrating elections. But merely holding elections is not the end of democracy. As mentioned above, as Ambedkar himself said, ensuring civic status is the beginning of civil liberties. Thus, in any talk of civil liberties, who is the subject? Who is the person for whom civil liberties are predicated? That subject is a person who has a civic status. He has to be a human being, a citizen, to be able to have civil liberties. But we have a culture which says that certain people should not even be treated as human beings. In that case, where does the question of civil liberties arise at all? If it is said that certain people are only 5 per cent human beings, or 10 per cent human being, and that only a few people are 100 per cent human beings, where does the question of civil rights arise? Who is the subject who holds those rights? Even within what is called bourgeois law, there is a subject who is entitled to rights. Who is that subject? A major premise of bourgeois democracy is that all subjects, all people who live in a society, have equal civic entitlement to rights, regardless of whether they actually get those rights or not. Whether they get those rights or not is a question of their economic power, the extent of the property they own, the kind of jobs they have, and even whether they have a job or not, and so on. But the notion of bourgeois civil liberties presumes that civic status is the starting point of entitlement for rights. In our country, however, we have a society wherein that civic status itself is denied to certain persons, who are even denied the right to be seen as human beings. In this society, 10 per cent of the population is totally denied this right, while another 10 per cent is seen as being human to the extent of only 5 per cent, and not being human to the remaining 95 per cent. The percentage of being a human keeps gradually increasing with a rise in one's caste and only brahmins are seen to be 100 per cent human beings. Now this kind of a society cannot be the bearer of a democracy, as democracy cannot be realised unless the system of caste is annihilated. This is a very powerful idea which emerges from Ambedkar's writings. And this idea has to become part of the understanding of the civil rights movement. Hopefully we would be able to integrate this idea in the APCLC.

We still have a lot of differences amongst ourselves. There are some people who resigned from the organisation, alleging that it is becoming an anti-reddy, anti-kamma organisation. So we said okay, if you think you are a reddy, you can go out. If you are simply born a reddy, we have no objection, but if you think that you are a reddy and behave like one, you have to go out from the organisation. You may be born in any caste, even a dominating one, but as long as you understand that the issue of caste in itself is undemocratic and if you are prepared to work against caste, work for the annihilation of caste, you are welcome to join the APCLC, regardless of wherever you are born. But if you say that you are leaving the APCLC because it has become an anti-reddy organisation, that means that you are condoning caste by regarding yourself as a reddy. In that case, you have no place in the organisation. We, therefore, had to lose a few people. But I think the organisation as a whole today has come to accept this understanding of the need to do away with caste completely.

Women's Rights and Dalits' Rights

Having said this, I would like to delineate a few problems as well as certain issues we are dealing with that I have come across as part of our experience. We commonly find in AP today that two issues have become very much a part of the current political concern. These are women's rights and dalits' rights. These two have percolated through political concern all over the country during the last ten years, which is a very good development. But what is not so positive is the fact these two are being pitched against each other in many contexts. Very often, when we go to a particular village where a complaint has been lodged that untouchability is being practised against dalits or that some physical assault has taken place on them, there is often a counter-complaint from the upper castes that the dalits have harassed upper caste women, or that they have raped an upper caste girl. Such complaints have, in fact, become so common that we invariably expect to come across them whenever we visit any village on a fact-finding mission. There was a very major incident of killing of dalits in a village called Chundur in Guntur district on 6 August 1991.[12] The justification for the

[12] Eight dalits were massacred by men belonging to the reddy and telaga castes. See 'Post-Chundur and Other Chundurs' in Section VI of this volume.

killing given by the upper castes was that the dalits boys had become very arrogant, that they were very indisciplined, and had been harassing upper caste girls. Usually, the term 'upper caste women' is not used, and it is just alleged that the dalit boys are harassing women and that they have raped many women. The assumption that these women belong to the upper castes is inherent in the complaints.

As I said, in Indian culture, one can never separate the 'women' question from the 'caste' question. In that village, the complaint was that a brahmin woman had been raped. The rape of any woman and the rape of a brahmin woman are not the same thing because in our culture, the rape of a brahmin woman is much more horrible than the rape of some other nonbrahmin woman. So in Chundur, the allegation was that a brahmin woman had been raped. This was intended to create the most negative image about the accused. The Manu Dharmashastra says that even if a dalit, or a sudra falls in love with a brahmin woman and has sexual intercourse with her, his penis must be cut and he must be killed, for that is the biggest possible sin that any dalit can commit, as per the brahminical Dharmashastras. The question of rape does not even arise. Nobody in Chundur had read the Dharmashastras, but what they propagate is an inveterate part of our culture. When we talk of Manu and why we should oppose the Manu Dharmashastras, we are not assuming that people are reading them. But what these shastras propound has become so much a part of our culture and our understanding that everybody seems to have a Manu sitting inside his mind even without reading the shastras.

We observed the same scenario when we went for fact-finding to that village. However, it was easy to expose the falsity of the argument there. Usually, there are hardly three or four brahmin families in any village, and it is very easy to locate them. In that village, there were only two brahmin families, so we went to both of them and tried to find out if any woman in their house 'had been raped'. But they said no, nothing of the kind had happened. Then we tried to find out whether any woman at all in the village had been raped. Here too, we found nothing. But the news that dalits had raped a woman had already spread very widely. However, even if this were true, it does not mean that all dalits can be massacred for the wrongdoing of a few of them. Still, this sort of a reaction to the purported crime of a few dalits gives the perpetrators of the violence some kind of a moral justification in terms of the kind of morality prevailing in society.

Subsequently, however, we found that not just rumours were being spread against the dalits but counter-cases were actually being filed. One can

imagine how difficult the situation would have become for the dalits. First, they were attacked, then subjected to humiliation, and to untouchability, and then even formally accused of a crime through the lodging of a police complaint. The irony of the situation is that the accused actually filed a police complaint alleging that the victims were guilty of molesting women of their families, thus making the victims also the accused. The police are always happy to file counter-complaints because then they can take money from both sides, which they do habitually. But the situation of the dalits differs significantly from that of people on the other side. While the latter can afford to go to court once in ten or fifteen days, the dalits have to give up their jobs, their work, and their labour and go and sit in the court, which acts as a pressure on them to go in for a compromise. Usually, after a counter-case is filed, feelers are sent out to dalits to forget their case, with the covert promise that the case against them would also be forgotten and withdrawn. That is the end of the matter. Frequently, the dalits are forced to come to a compromise, and even agree to turn hostile in court if at all the case comes up for trial. Thus, the perpetrators of atrocities on dalits get away merely by filing a counter-case, alleging that the dalits who protest against these atrocities are actually themselves involved in atrocities against women. This has become a very common phenomenon in AP.

I am sure that if one were to visit villages in other states, one would find that this sort of thing occurs there too. Sometimes the reverse also happens. There was a case when a headmaster in a high school in Guntur district was accused of molesting a girl. He had actually done it, but then he used the ploy that he was a dalit and that the sarpanch of that village was an upper caste man who had lodged a police complaint against him merely because he was a dalit. The inspector also happened to be an upper caste man. So the headmaster used his dalit status to try to get rid of the charge of molestation or atrocities that he had tried to perpetrate in the school. However, this sort of situation happens less frequently as the dalits are usually the ones who are unjustifiably accused of committing molestation or atrocities on women. In many situations, we had to campaign against counter-cases, talk to the superintendent of police, the collector, and the local sub-inspector, while arguing that they could not go on registering every case given to them and then force the two parties concerned to strike a compromise outside the police station. This just cannot be done. I think this signifies one of the major problems we face when we take up issues of untouchability.

The other problem we face pertains to a certain attitude. After all, why

is it that both the women question and the dalit question today are taken up as serious political questions in India? One very obvious reason is that people from both these sections of society have moved up in life. Thus, educated people, MLAs, MPs, ministers, and people who are ready to voice their opinions have come forward to assert their rights either as women or as members of the caste against which atrocities are being committed. And this has forced the whole of society to rethink about these things, to make some amends, to show some accommodation, to create legislation and adopt measures such as passing the Panchayati Raj Bill to give one-third of the seats to women, among other things. This pressure from the women's movement and the dalit movement has indeed led to some amendments and some kind of accommodation. But still not much is achieved because the dalits still have no power in their hands. Albeit, they are asserting their right to power, and their right to equality and justice. But power still resides in the hands of other people who do accommodate because it is impossible not to do so in the face of the dalits' struggle against them. But this accommodation is also done in a dishonest way.

Perversion of Institutions

What occurs frequently is that some law is made but never implemented or is allowed to be perverted in practice. In AP, our experience is that the implementation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, which is commonly called the SC-ST Act, has been extremely unsatisfactory because of the dishonest attitude of the administration. For instance, the Act says that there has to be a special court for hearing of offences against SCs and STs in every district. Now, there are many legislations which provide for special courts in every district, and one of them is TADA. TADA was enacted in July 1985; and in August, special courts had been instituted in every district in AP. But when the SC-ST Act came into force in 1989, the same stipulation for special courts in every district was ignored, and for two years now since the enactment of the Act, there are still no special courts. Then, suddenly the Chundur massacre took place. People like us gave press statements that all the accused should be booked under the SC-ST Act and sent to the special court. But where were the special courts? They still did not exist. We all had thought that the special courts had been constituted because the Act was passed two years ago, but no, they were still not there. So, the dalit organisations launched an agitation for special courts, after which the chief minister [Janardhan Reddy of the Congress] made the following statement: 'I will set up three special courts in the three regions of Andhra Pradesh—coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana.'

Those who don't know the Act think that he is doing a favour, and claim, 'Look at Janardhan Reddy, he is a good man. He is setting up special courts for us.' We try to tell the people that he is doing no favour and that there is a provision in the law for one special court for each district, so he is merely implementing the law. However, the stipulation of the law is itself very inconvenient because each region consists of nine districts and there is only one special court for the entire region. It is especially inconvenient for a witness, who may himself be a victim to spend the whole day traversing three or four districts, and giving evidence in the special court. The court may or may not be benevolent enough to compensate the witness financially for travelling all that distance, so the latter may have to bear both the cost and the inconvenience of testifying in the special court.

Further, it is usually observed that the most corrupt officers are posted to those courts. There is a public prosecutor in Mahbubnagar, where the special court for Telangana is situated. That fellow had practically 'opened a shop', as we used to say, and would openly make the following offer, 'You give this much, I will raise no objection to the bail, and you can take bail and go away. If you give this much [more], I will see that no charges [are framed and you] are not prosecuted.' This was being done in a court set up for protecting the rights of the weaker sections of society! While bar associations have passed resolutions alleging that these people are corrupt, the state allows such corrupt people to continue in office in spite of resolutions and protests. This kind of a perversion has permeated everywhere. Finally, the state's response is that since the situation has become so perverted it, they would nominate the first additional district judge of every district as the special judge instead of implementing the enactment of special courts.

Thus, we see that even when the underprivileged fight for their rights and manage to achieve them legally, those who are in power do not want to give them those rights. The latter, therefore, create some kind of an institutional set-up and then pervert it to prevent the former from enjoying those rights. It thus becomes part of the job of the civil liberties movement to ensure that this kind of institutional perversion does not take place. This job can be fulfilled it various ways. Many civil rights organisations have a team of lawyers who work as part of the system—they function in those courts, help the people concerned to be able to enjoy their rights. But this is a major task for civil liberties organisations and even poses problems for them. One can cite many examples of such problems arising in such situations.

Reservation in the Private Sector

Finally, I would like to end with one demand, which I think is very crucial and needs to be taken up. This concerns reservations. We all remember the agitation against the Mandal Commission, and how viciously and virulently the commission's recommendations were opposed by upper castes, especially in North India. In the south, people have got accustomed to reservation; but in the north, this is still new for them. Finally, the Supreme Court also upheld the commission's report by providing for some reservation anyway. The report is now being implemented. But while the agitation against it was taking place, what was happening on the other side? Till now, the policy reservation has been confined only to the public sector. There have been agitations and movements, there are statutes, laws, and Supreme Court judgments, ultimately saying that it is perfectly fine to give reservation in the public sector. But in the meantime, the public sector is literally disappearing as everything is getting privatised. So today even if the Mandal Commission report comes into force and gives reservation in telecommunications, how will it benefit the BCs? Where is the telecommunications sector? It is in the hands of Himachal Futuristic[13] or whatever it is called, which is now hosting, and sponsoring the announcements of today's election results by mediapersons like Prannoy Roy and others. So, ironically, the public sector is vanishing just at a time when certain sections of the dalits and BCs have mustered enough courage to come forward, and vocally agitate and fight for their rights. However, there is nothing in the Indian Constitution which says that reservation has to be confined only to the public sector.

Articles 15(4) and 16(4), if read plainly, give complete justification for reservation in the private sector as much as in the public sector. We are conducting a survey in AP to initiate a campaign on reservation in the private sector. I think we all know perfectly well what is happening in this sector. Usually the person who sets up a private unit brings in only his fellow caste people to take up the important jobs in the enterprise and allows local people belonging to the BCs or SCs to perform only menial jobs. Further, one also does not find a single woman except an occasional typist employed in any private sector, factory or any such institution. We are, therefore, conducting a survey to find out how many jobs are given to BCs, SCs, and women in the private sector, either in industries or in colleges.

[13] Himachal Futuristic Communications Limited (HFCL), a firm dealing with telecom equipment and optical fibre cables, was established in 1987. HFCL has been in the news in 2011 over its managing director Mahendra Nahata's alleged involvement with the 2G spectrum allocation scam.

At least in industries, sometimes competent people are required; though in educational institutions, such competence does not seem to be required. So when a reddy sets up a college, all the jobs in it are given to reddys. I am also sure that if a vokkaliga were to set up a college here, all the jobs in it would go to vokkaligas, irrespective of merit, because nobody thinks merit is required in a college. I believe that the Janata Dal [in Karnataka] has already passed a resolution to this effect, though one has to wait and see if they would implement this resolution if and when they come to power!

Thus, the civil rights movement has to take up this issue as a major demand. As I said, it is not a question of how much we ultimately manage to achieve. We have still not been able to put a full stop to encounters or lock-up deaths or any other form of atrocities on dalits. But what we have been able to achieve is to create a public opinion in society that we are not doing this for the sake of elections, as we do not belong to any political party, but that we are doing this for the sake of ensuring righteousness in society. The civil rights movement talks in terms of principles. And as a matter of principle, we have been able to convince society that this arbitrary exercise of power by the police will not do. They just cannot pick up somebody and shoot him dead by merely alleging that he is a naxalite. They cannot torture somebody, kill him in police lockup and accuse him of being a dacoit. If he is a dacoit, there is a court to declare that, not the police. We have been able to spread this idea in society and we have been able to create and strengthen certain institutions that work to ensure the protection of people's rights. After all, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has come into being partly because of the pressure from the United Nations and such organisations, but partly also because of the civil rights movement in India, which has been consistently putting pressure for the creation of a judicial body which would investigate or at least enquire into the offences committed by the police and paramilitary. Today, in AP, we have filed a writ petition in the High Court about encounters, in which we have asked the High Court to declare that one human rights court has to be set up in every district, not merely to enquire into police excesses but to actually try and prosecute police officers who have committed these excesses. Three months ago, Chandrababu Naidu declared that he would set up human rights courts in the form of an additional district judge in every district. Thus, this kind of creation of institutions and institutional culture can be achieved and we have succeeded in doing so in the case of police atrocities and TADA, among other things.

Therefore, equal opportunity has been achieved to an extent; and partial equality has been achieved through reservation. However, since the public

sector is rapidly being replaced by the private sector, we need to initiate a major movement for reservation in the private sector for women, for dalits, for BCs, and for tribals. While the civil rights movement cannot itself create that kind of a movement, we can help create a conducive climate for such a movement, create support, sympathy, justification, and legitimacy for that kind of a movement. I think that is a very important task; and in the context of the new economic policy, of liberalisation, and restructuring of the economy, I think this important task could be linked to the general struggle for the annihilation of caste. This is a movement that we are taking up in AP, and have already started the effort by undertaking a survey. We are hoping that we would also be joined in this task by the PDF and other democratic-minded people. That is necessary.

This is what I meant when I said that when one talks of caste, it is not just a question of opposing atrocities on dalits. From opposing these atrocities on dalits, to a campaign for reservation in the private sector is a very long journey. But that journey can be successfully undertaken if we understand caste as by itself, in itself, by its very nature, being a denial of democracy. Then we would be able to understand that merely the killing of dalits in the villages by upper caste people, or savarna Hindus, is not the only atrocity perpetrated in relation to caste. Any consequence of caste as a system, any consequence of caste as a hierarchical, undemocratic system, of caste as a mode of power—any such consequence is undemocratic. One of the undemocratic consequences of caste is that everybody is allotted one dharma and they have to stick to that dharma because that is the whole basis of caste, the logic of caste in our country whereas liberty and freedom demand that everyone should be free to choose what they would like to do. Everyone should be free to choose what they should spend their creative talent on. But Hindu dharma is exactly the opposite of that. It stipulates that one should be confined to a particular predecided occupation and that one has no right to change it. It is this rigidity that has created inherent social and cultural drawbacks for people who are born in the BCs or SCs in terms of education because education was the one thing that was systematically denied to them by the Hindu dharma. In practice, of course, this dharma may not have been implemented to the extent of 100 per cent and many dalits may have got educated. But that is a different matter and as a matter of principle, as a matter of a guiding philosophical principle of society, the right to education was denied to them. If this practice has to be annihilated, ensuring equal opportunity for education to dalits in a country where education was supposed to be in theory confined only to brahmins, becomes a major task of the movement to annihilate caste and, therefore, also a major task of the civil rights movement. Thus, these movements must take up the issues of education, employment, dignity, and status in society for the dalits and those who have hitherto been denied these rights. It also needs to be taken up in the context of economic restructuring—as reservation in the private sector—and we are trying to create some literature for this purpose. We will also be sending it to you. I think I will stop here and give you time to ask some questions. Thank you.

VI

Resisting Caste, Issues at Stake

Post-Chundur and Other Chundurs

EPW, 19 October 1991

One reason why Chundur[1] caught the whole nation's attention is the magnitude of the massacre that took place there. Eight dead bodies were fished out of the irrigation canals and the drains of Chundur, and the surrounding villages within three days of the gruesome assault of 6 August; the whereabouts of another nine men are not known to this day, six weeks after the killing, which means that they too were killed and thrown into the canals but their bodies did not float up at the places that were searched. This makes a total of seventeen dead. The number becomes eighteen if one adds Mandru Parishudha Rao, who died of shock the day after the carnage after seeing the mutilated dead body of his younger brother, 21-year-old Mandru Ramesh. And it becomes nineteen if one adds Kommerla Anil Kumar, an articulate young dalit, who survived the massacre of 6 August to give a graphic account of the incident, but was shot dead by the police on 17 September in the course of an attempt by the latter to remove a hunger strike camp set up by the dalits at Chundur. Such a large casualty figure is a natural and sufficient reason for the attention that Chundur has received, which is why one does not search for other reasons, and, therefore, one does not see other Chundurs.

[1] Chundur is a large village and the *mandal* headquarters in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh.

In Andhra Pradesh, assaults by Forward Castes (and in a few cases, by Backward Caste landowners) on dalits have received the maximum attention when they have taken place in the politically important central coastal districts of Guntur, Krishna, Prakasam, and West and East Godavari, and there too mainly when these have taken place against the two principal untouchable castes, the malas and the madigas. Assaults that have taken place against the dalit communities, including the malas and madigas, outside these districts, and against other oppressed communities in these districts, have received much less attention, not only from the government and politicians but also from the democratic movement. Perhaps the most neglected of the victims are the erukalas and yanadis, once officially and still popularly regarded as criminal tribes. Apart from the political importance attached to anything that happens in the canal-irrigated area of the Krishna–Godavari river basins, perhaps the main reason for this lopsided attention is precisely the same reason why the attacks take such a ferocious and mass form in these districts. The malas and madigas of these districts are better educated, and more assertive and identity conscious than the other dalit communities living there or elsewhere. Perhaps more significantly, the younger generation has started rejecting the social and political subordination to the Forward Castes that has traditionally been the lot of the dalits, and as a consequence, has also started rejecting the submission to one or the other of the ruling class parties, a submission that was structured through the traditional caste domination. It is this socially and politically effective advancement and assertiveness of the malas and madigas that the Forward Castes find so intolerable, leading to assaults such as Karamchedu[2] and Chundur, and yet this is also the reason why the assaults attract considerable attention and protest. The protest has already brought to centre stage the necessity of incorporating the struggle to annihilate caste as an integral element of the total democratic struggle. When the protest takes an equally assertive and effective form in regions outside the river basins and in defence of all dalit communities, its job would be already partly done. However, obstacles would still remain, not only the obstacles defined by the theoretical and practical problems relating to the incorporation of the anticaste struggle within the total democratic struggle, but also the obstacles on the other side, whose principal forms are the armed might of the state and the organised counter-assertion of the

[2] Six men were killed and three women were raped, all of them dalits from the madiga community, on 17 July 1985 by a mob of kamma caste men in Karamchedu village of Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh. See 'The Karamchedu Killings' in Section I, and also 'Karamchedu: Second Anniversary' in Section II of this volume.

casteist Forward Caste forces. We had a very ugly preview of the latter during the anti-Mandal agitation,[3] but nevertheless the stage for a full battle against caste would be set.

Other Chundurs

At Chinakada, a remote hamlet of the very backward and remote north coastal district of Vizianagaram, on 31 July 1989, four tribals of one family—Tekkali Bagam Dora and his three sons, Adenna Dora, Ramanna Dora and Arunna Dora—were slaughtered by a thirty-strong mob of savarna Hindus from the neighbouring village of Kannam. The explanation offered was that the tribals were thieves, and that the harassed 'people' had killed them. In truth, it was an act of vengeance perpetrated on behalf of an excise contractor. This tribal family, like most tribal families, was making and selling liquor on its own, thereby violating the official monopoly granted to the contractor.

At Kaspa Gadabavalasa, close to but outside the legendary Parvatipuram Agency,[4] in the same district, on 22 November 1990, four tribals and a Scheduled Caste (SC) man were chased and hacked to death by a mob of about 400 men, comprising a heterogeneous mixture of cultivating castes. This village and its neighbours had been recommended by the district collector for inclusion in the Agency to protect the tribals' lives and land, but before the government could take a decision, a gruesome justification was provided by the mass murder of Eedara Phakir, Gorle Ramulu, Misala Pentaiah, Doni Rattalu, all tribals of Kaspa Gadabavalasa, and of Garugubilli Pothaiah, a dalit of neighbouring Kichada, who tried to intercede on behalf of the tribals while the killing was going on. The conflict was over eighteen acres of land, which Eedara Chinnaiah, the father of Eedara Phakir, had obtained from the Kurupam zamindar during the pre-Independence days. In recent years, the non-tribals have started claiming that the land had been sold to them by Eedara Chinnaiah, which led to litigation that was finally settled in favour of the tribals. The project officer of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency, Parvatipuram, was slated to visit the village and put the settlement on record. At this stage, the non-tribals

[3] An agitation by 'upper' castes following the then prime minister V.P. Singh's decision in 1990 to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which fixed a quota for members of the BCs in jobs in the public sector so as to redress caste discrimination. See 'This Anti-Mandal Mania' in Section IV of this volume.

[4] The area which was the epicentre of the tribal–peasant uprising of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the then Srikakulam district of north Andhra Pradesh, known popularly as the 'Srikakulam naxalite uprising'.

raided the land apparently to harvest the standing crop, and when the tribals protested and threatened to go and fetch the project officer, they were chased and massacred.

At Mandadam in Guntur district, during the second half of 1989, two erukala tribesmen were abducted, tortured and killed by the men of a fishing contractor, for the sin of violating the exclusive contract that he had obtained from the government to catch and sell fish in some tanks in and around Tenali. This conflict between various fishing communities with traditional rights over fishing in tanks and canals, on the one hand, and government-designated contractors who buy that right in auction, on the other hand, is a major arena of struggle in this state, and has resulted in considerable violence against the fishing communities.

At Reddypalli in Ranga Reddy district (named so after the late father-in-law of twice chief minister Chenna Reddy), a landlord close to Ram Reddy, MLA of Pargi (presently one of the host of Reddys populating Nedurumilli Janardhan Reddy's council of ministers), dragged out of the house and burnt alive an erukala peasant named Venkataiah on 12 February 1990. The landlord had sold some land to the victim, but there had been no registration of the sale, as there never is in such matters. By and by, the landlord sold the same land to somebody else, and when Venkataiah questioned this duplicity, he was branded as a 'sorcerer' and dragged out of his house in broad daylight, then a pyre was lit and he was thrown into it. His misfortune was that he had a religious streak in him and was something of a cross between a popular hakim and soothsayer in the village, which made the accusation of 'sorcery' against him credible to the credulous.

All the victims mentioned above are tribals of one kind or another. Tribals are frequently romanticised and patronised as the only or principal victims of oppressive social structure/distorted development. This romanticising is rubbish. Exclusive pity for only one section of the oppressed people can even be dangerous. But the tribals mentioned above, a minuscule minority caught in the plains and frequently suspected of being thieves, are particularly vulnerable. Those tribals who live in the forests have the security of numbers, of exclusivity, of a blemishless—even an idyllic—reputation, and (in recent years) of the support of armed squads of the naxalites. The malas and madigas of the developed regions have the advantage of better education, awareness, a proud political identity deriving from Ambedkar, and in recent times, a vocal dalit movement, as well as a growing naxalite presence among their youth. The rest of the untouchable or tribal communities are much more vulnerable.

We have mentioned one example of a dalit killed on the pretext of sorcery. Belief in witchcraft based on the principle of sympathetic magic (called *banamati* or *chetabadi* in Telugu) is quite widespread in the south and west of Telangana, that is in the districts of Medak, Mahbubnagar, Ranga Reddy and parts of Nizamabad, as well as in the territorially and culturally contiguous districts of Raichur, Gulbarga and Bidar in Karnataka. The sorcerers are invariably tribals, dalits or persons of the artisan or service castes. They are men as well as women. One of the many undesirable consequences of the belief in and the practice of sorcery is the frequent lynching of sorcerers by villagers. While some of the cases are genuine instances of lynching by misguided masses, a substantial number of cases are plain murders of 'inconvenient' dalits by village strongmen. A sorcerer usually has a smattering of literacy, if not learning (and literacy itself has a magical quality to the unlettered). He or she is feared and sometimes respected. And the audacity to tamper with fate encourages the audacity to question the landlords. In an area where there is no widespread advancement of dalits, none of the extensive education and aspiration for social honour and respect that one finds in the central coastal districts, the individual 'sorcerer' can very well become a vehicle or at least a symbol of protest, and, therefore, 'killable material'. Perhaps more commonly, sorcery is merely a socially legitimate label to be stuck upon an inconvenient person that one wants to get rid of.

One only has to contrast Guntur with the Rayalaseema districts to realise that Chundur happened *not* because the dalits of Guntur are more oppressed than those elsewhere, but precisely because they have fought oppression, through conversion to Christianity (all the victims of Chundur, as those of Karamchedu, are Christians), through education, through entry to government jobs by using reservation, through wage rates commensurate with Green Revolution productivity, and through thousands of individual acts of mini-rebellion, day in and day out, and have put themselves on an unrelenting path of social and economic advancement and political autonomy. Where they have not done so, they are not killed *en masse* as in the central coastal districts, but individual rebels—men and women of exceptional courage and intelligence—are isolated and subjugated by murder, rape, ostracism and arson. Of these, rape is perhaps the most common, for it works as a weapon against the woman as well as her husband, whichever of the two is politically targeted, but it is also the least reported of all the 'atrocities against dalits'.

Chittoor, a district where the landlords felt very close to the seat of power during the reign of N.T. Rama Rao, for it is the native district of his politically powerful son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu, saw a series of assaults

on dalits during the period 1983–89. The worst of these assaults was at Bandlapalli, where, on 27 November 1987, four dalits were beaten and stabbed to death in a dispute over half an acre of cultivable wasteland. The murderers were a mixture of reddys and other Forward Caste landowners. The sessions court sentenced just one of them to imprisonment.

At Kothapoolavandlapalli in Anantapur district, on 6 June 1990, a madiga named Kullayappa was burnt alive by a mob of reddys and other castes. The immediate reason is too petty to even describe in detail, but as his wife Lakshmamma says, 'He would not tolerate the authoritarian behaviour of the village headmen, and would talk back at them.' That was sufficient, given the slightest pretext, to pull him out of his house, break his bones, drag him to a public place, light a pyre, throw him into it, and stand watch as he burnt to death.

At Moodurallapalli near Allagadda in Kurnool district, in a region dominated by a total feudal control of murderous armed reddy factions, on 18 March 1991, a mob of reddys beat to death Yesudas, a mala Christian. Incidentally, it is in this taluka that the fugitive murderers of Chundur are taking shelter as we write these lines. They put the dead body of Yesudas in a sack, which they kept at the centre of the village till nightfall, as a gruesome symbolic statement of what would happen to anyone who questioned their authority. After dark, they took the sack to a neighbouring hillock and burnt it. The victim's crime? Yesudas was originally from Cuddapah district and had migrated to this region in search of work. He had settled down as a farm-servant with a reddy landlord. He was sufficiently independent of spirit to resist the total submission demanded in his new home. When a friend of his employer started harassing his wife Iswaramma, he complained to his employer and 'made a fuss in public'. That was sufficient to cause his brutal murder.

The name of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy is quite familiar now even outside this state. He has been the most long-standing dissident within the Congress(I), hell-bent on becoming chief minister at whatever expense. He belongs to Cuddapah, a district that is as much a byword as Kurnool for bombs-and-guns factionalism led by gangs of reddy warlords. A vintage warlord is the chief minister-aspirant's father Y.S. Raja Reddy, sarpanch of Pulivendula. The family members, incidentally, are reddy Christians, and Rajasekhara Reddy made a pointed reference in his condemnation message after Chundur to the fact that the victims were mala Christians. Christian pity, however, has never deterred father and son from behaving like any other warlord. On 16 February 1990, the father personally presided over a seven-hour orgy of arson with one inspector of police and two sub-inspectors

at his side in his native village of Pulivendula. More than 150 houses of erukala tribespeople were burnt, blown up and destroyed in that orgy. He said later that the erukalas were thieves, and that the 'people' had burnt their houses, and he himself went there only to control and minimise the damage with the help of the police, which great duty they collectively performed by standing by and watching. In truth, the erukalas had been his henchmen from his youthful days, and had done all the nasty work that his faction ordered. They rigged his elections, beat up his enemies, organised his bandhs and roadblocks, and obeyed all his commands. However, in view of the need to pamper the rest of his constituency, he would inevitably give the erukalas a sound beating now and then, especially whenever there was a spate of thefts in the area and people started grumbling about big men protecting the thieves.

And so on, one can recount incident after incident.

Post-Chundur

All observers have remarked that the Forward Castes this time round are aggressively defending the massacre that was perpetrated in Chundur. They did not do so at the time of Karamchedu or any other major assault thereafter, at least not as obtrusively as to attract attention. All these observers accept without much discomfort the argument that the deepening political and economic crisis affecting our society, which makes democratic aspirations among the lower classes intolerable for the dominant sections, and the consequent degeneration of our political and social culture, are the principal factors underlying the newfound shamelessness of the Forward Castes. However, not all the observers would feel equally comfortable with the supplementary argument that it was the anti-Mandal agitation and the way it was hailed by the press and the intelligentsia that legitimised this shamelessness. That agitation was the first time after independence that the Forward Castes organised themselves across the nation in explicitly caste terms without being branded as communal, and on the contrary being hailed as principled fighters against narrow, casteist, vote-bloc politics. Those chickens have now come home to roost, in the form of the widespread acceptance by the Forward Castes of slogans like 'Long live the unity of the Forward Castes', 'Those who beg every morsel of food should not be arrogant', 'Beggars should behave beggar-like', etc, slogans which are the staple of the antidalit mobilisation drive post-Chundur. The reddys have roped in the kammas, the brahmins, the vaisyas, the kapus and the rajus in a 'Sarvajanabhyudaya Porata Samiti' (Struggle Committee for the Advancement of All People) and are organising dharnas, bandhs, processions

and roadblocks, to publicise the 'injustice' done to them. For those who watched the anti-Mandal agitation, it was a revelation to observe the same faces going round in these processions talking about 'the oppression suffered by Forward Castes at the hands of dalits in the villages'.

As with the anti-Mandal agitation, this time too, the police are handling the unrest very gingerly. On 17 August, the Forward Castes gave a call for a bandh in Guntur district, and enforced it with considerable rowdyism. They attacked Andhra Christian College in Guntur town, a college attended by SC Christians in large numbers, and burnt books, clothes and certificates in room after room of the college. The police were present but were very 'considerate' towards the attackers. It took considerable provocation for them to open fire, and that too so carefully that nobody was killed. Their response was different when the dalits sat on a hunger strike at Chundur demanding justice, and resisted the attempts of the police to remove the tent and arrest them. The police opened fire without hesitation, aimed straight at Kommerla Anil Kumar, and killed him. That was on 10 September. Anil Kumar, a college student, was a near-victim of the massacre of 6 August and, therefore, an excellent witness. He was also one of those who took over the leadership of the Chundur dalits' protest movement after the police arrested Katti Padma Rao, secretary of the Dalit Mahasabha, and directed him to stay at his home town and not enter Chundur.

Every movement requires a moral justification and an ideology. The samiti of the Forward Castes is yet to develop an ideology ('merit' is not an all-season ideology) but it has created and widely spread a certain moral justification. It is not very original and indeed has come to be almost expected. But what it lacks in originality it almost makes up for with its viciousness.

The dalits, it is said, had harassed women of the Forward Castes no end; it has even been said at the height of the campaign that Forward Caste women have been raped by dalits in every village around and including Chundur. It is further said that in the subdivisional headquarters town of Tenali, Forward Caste girl students make a detour of dalit areas while going to and from school/college to avoid molestation. Perhaps the most explicitly ugly story invented during the course of this campaign is the following: the reddys and kapus of Chundur, during the month-long period of conflict and tension preceding the final assault of 6 August, had stopped employing dalit labour for transplantation, etc, and women of landowning families were themselves doing this labour. It is alleged that one day, while some of these women were transplanting paddy in their fields, the dalits went up to them and picked up a quarrel arguing that they would have to starve if the landowners themselves started doing such work. This part of the story is quite credible, but the story does not stop here. The next thing the dalits allegedly did was to strip the Forward Caste women naked, and force them to pull out the seedlings that they had planted and to replant them. All this is supposed to have happened at Chundur in broad daylight one day during this transplanting season.

This campaign goes on unhindered, and is yet to be so much as condemned by any of the major political parties (just as none of them expressed protest at the explicitly casteist anti-Mandal campaign). The Forward Castes have held dharnas, demonstrations, roadblocks, etc, in protest against 'the oppression suffered at the hands of the dalits'. They have pushed the women to the forefront, as exhibits of the alleged acts of oppression.

It is needless to add that these stories are concocted. Their only real basis, if any, lies in two likely facts. One is that with the rise of education and awareness among dalits, there has been a certain reversal of the *anuloma* norm of inter-caste sexual relations, be they marital or extramarital. Cases of dalit men developing intimacy with and, in some cases, even marrying Forward Caste women are no longer very uncommon in these districts. Anyone familiar with the caste-determined social culture knows how intolerable such intimacy is to the Forward Castes. Two, it is also likely that dalit college students, who are present in fairly large numbers in and around Chundur, have been indulging in eve-teasing in the same way as 'savarna' students, for such behaviour has become part of the degenerate culture prevailing in campuses everywhere. But while eve-teasing by Forward Caste youth is regarded as a harmless if irritating prank, it becomes intolerable when a dalit youth teases a Forward Caste woman, for it is not her dignity that is seen to be violated but the community's 'honour'. In any case, if harassment of women is sufficient reason for the Chundur carnage, as otherwise intelligent persons including newspaper editorial writers in this state have been suggesting, then a very large proportion of the male population of this or any other state would have to be massacred, and almost all of them would be Forward Caste men. Indeed, harassment of dalit women by men of Forward Castes is such a common fact of village life that this accusation symbolises an inversion of astonishing effrontery.

The dalits, refreshingly, have not been quiet. The dalits of Chundur itself, witnesses to the most horrible massacre of its kind in recent years, have courageously and steadfastly set a new trend of agitation and protest. They have rejected the hypocritical overtures of the ruling party, as well as the theatrics of the dissident Congressmen and the opposition leaders. It has become a customary charade in all such cases that either the chief minister and his coterie succeed in projecting themselves as saviours, who would

have done everything to protect the victims if only they had had an inkling of what was impending, or the ruling party's dissidents or opposition leaders take the victims under their wing with the promise of becoming their benefactors once they come to power. The dalits of Chundur have firmly rejected all such overtures and sent back the netas in a most insulting fashion. At first, it was the activists of the Dalit Mahasabha and the left revolutionary groups who initiated mudslinging and abuse at the visiting netas, but soon the victims themselves started participating in the protest. The egoistic leaders of the Congress(I) and TDP are smarting under this unusual humiliation, but there is precious little they can do, except to curse the 'outsiders' and 'extremists' for poisoning the minds of the innocent dalits. Even if this situation does not last very long, it signifies a definite and positive change from past experience.

The dalits of Chundur, dalit organisations, and other democratic forces are also agitating against the complicity of the police. As has been widely reported, the police played a criminal role on the day of the massacre. A large police force was present in the village from the previous night, led by a chief inspector of police. This force was, however, a mute spectator to the massacre. Its only activity that afternoon was to dispatch its van at the request of the reddy and kapu women to a neighbouring village to safely bring back Forward Caste schoolchildren, because the women expressed the apprehension that 'the malas would harm their children'. The police simply turned away and chose not to see who was harming whom. But when accused of knavery, the police plead foolishness. Their explanation for the shameful role they played that afternoon is that the reddys had spread the rumour of an impending attack from the dalits that afternoon and that the police were taken in by this rumour and were busy shooing away the mala youth when the reddys surprised them with a sudden attack from behind. Apart from being a voluntary confession of idiocy, this does not explain their inactivity once they saw what was actually happening. Nor does it explain why no information of the massacre reached the district headquarters till the next day; why the deputy superintendent of police, Tenali, sent a misleading message that evening to Guntur, saying that all was peaceful in Chundur; why, consequently, no news of the massacre was published in the next day's newspapers though Chundur is situated hardly fifty kilometers from Vijayawada, the headquarters of the newspaper publishing industry in coastal AP.

One of the major demands of the dalits and the democratic movement supporting them is that the guilty policemen should be arrested for abetment of the crime. But the government has insisted on viewing the police inaction not as abetment but as merely failure in the performance of duty, and so has persistently refused to book the policemen for the crime they were party to. Whoever is giving legal advice to the government appears to be ignorant of the fact that under Section 4 of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, even 'neglect of duty' in such matters is a crime punishable with imprisonment, and that the policemen should be arrested anyway.

Another important demand pertains to the setting up of a special court. In such cases, it is essential to carry out a quick investigation and trial. The Karamchedu massacre took place six years ago. Lawyers handling the case are confident that, with the available evidence, at least twenty persons can be convicted to a minimum of life imprisonment. It is evident that if the trial had been completed and the sentence enforced after the Karamchedu incident, that would have acted as a powerful deterrent to the murderers of Chundur. But unfortunately, the Karamchedu trial is yet to even start, let alone be completed. It is to ensure quick and effective disposal of such cases that the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act mentioned above, which was enacted in 1989, provides for the setting up (Section 14) of special courts, one in each district, to try offences of 'atrocities on dalits'. Two years have passed, and not a single special court has been set up till now. This is in contrast to TADA,[5] another legislation that provides for the setting up of special courts, with the difference that it is not aimed at protecting the oppressed, but at protecting the state from militant opponents. In the case of TADA, every district and sessions court in the state was declared a designated court, as the special court for TADA offences is called, within *two months* of the passage of the act by parliament, and upwards of 15,000 persons have been sent to jail for TADA offences in Andhra Pradesh till now.

After Chundur, there was a widespread demand for the setting up of a special court. After some prevarication, Janardhan Reddy announced the setting up of not one special court for each district as stipulated by the Act, but merely one in each of the three regions of the state, that is, coastal Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema. And this he announced very graciously, in the manner of a deity granting a boon. The special court for Telangana, for example, is to be set up at Mahbubnagar, at the southern corner of the region. It is easy to imagine the plight of dalits, say, of Adilabad,

[5] Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act—a harsh, undemocratic legislation that was enacted by parliament in 1985 and was allowed to lapse in 1995 following widespread allegations of its abuse.

who have to travel a minimum of ten hours by a fast bus, if their complaints are to be tried at this special court.

The next major demand pertains to the arrest of all the principal participants in the massacre. Although about 250 persons have been named in the case and about half of them have been arrested, among the four main organisers of the carnage, only one, the sarpanch of Chundur, has been arrested, and that too because he himself voluntarily surrendered to the police. The other three are absconding, and in spite of repeated announcements by the chief minister that the government would impose fine and, if necessary, confiscate their properties as well as those of the persons giving shelter to them, as it can very well lawfully do under Section 16 of the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, read with Section 10-A of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, no such action has been taken till now.

What the government has done with alacrity instead is to constitute a judicial enquiry commission to go into the massacre, which is about the most meaningless thing anybody could think of; order a departmental enquiry into the 'failure' of the police; and announce monetary compensation of Rs 1 lakh each to the families of the dead. The immediate response of the dalits was to reject the offer of money in compensation for the killing. The dalits as well as the democratic organisations supporting them refused to participate in the judicial enquiry, and they insisted on continuing the agitation in all possible forms till their main demands were realised. The government, on its part, has made it a matter of prestige to have its way. It is difficult to say which way the matter would end for the situation is in daily flux, but it is instructive to take a look at the means that the government is employing to achieve its ends.

Apart from the determination of the state to reassert its authority, what must be seen here is also the vengeance of the ruling class politicians, who are bitterly unhappy with the truculent response of the dalits to their overtures. Thus reinforced, the suppressive force of the ruling classes is working through a combination of political cajolery backed by the police force, for which they have found an ideal ally in Raghuveer Prasad Meena, superintendent of police (SP), Guntur. This police officer is easily the most notorious man that the state has seen after K.S. Vyas, who dubiously rose to fame during the post-Emergency years and dominated the state hand in glove with the TDP government during the period 1983–89, ending up as deputy inspector general in charge of anti-naxalite operations. Meena is not yet senior enough to play exactly the same role but he too is shaped in a mould that foretells the history of the days to come.

Meena took charge as SP, Guntur, the very morning that the Chundur massacre took place, and, therefore, he had no option but to claim that the event surprised him. His normal preference is, however, just the other way round. Before coming to Guntur, he was SP, Nizamabad, one of the 'extremist-affected' districts of north Telangana. During his three-year tenure in Nizamabad, thirty-five persons were killed in 'encounters', with hardly one or two of them being real. Here is a description of one of them, an 'encounter' which he personally supervised, something that few police officers of that rank normally do:

> The village is Tippapur, a few km to the south of the 7th National Highway on its Hyderabad–Nagpur segment, about a 120 km from Hyderabad. In the early hours of 23 July 1990, SP of Nizamabad Meena personally led more than 100 armed policemen into the village. They came in four jeeps and two big vans, carrying automatic weapons of many kinds. The villagers were just then getting up and going out. The police bolted the doors of all the houses from outside. They fixed a loudspeaker to a jeep and went around the village announcing the names of seven wanted 'radicals'. They were asked to come out and surrender. When none of them did, the police got into action. Those people who had already come out of their houses to go to the fields or for morning ablutions were rounded up and herded at the building, which the radicals used as venue for their People's Courts. About 200 persons were herded this way. Then the police raided the houses of the wanted seven, opened the doors and created havoc while the doors of all the other houses were closed from outside. They broke household goods, abused women vulgarly, and by and by, they found four of the seven they wanted, some in their homes, some hiding in haystacks, some in cattle sheds... Three of them were taken to a cattle shed and shot dead there. The fourth was later shot dead in the haystack where he lay hidden. At the end of the killing, the SP walked up to the people herded in the building and told them that an 'encounter' had just then taken place and four extremist youth of the village were killed.

This is the gentleman who is now SP of Guntur. Of course, he will not do a Tippapur with the murderers of Chundur—indeed, he is conducting the investigation into the massacre in a most impeccably lawful manner—but all his suppressive instincts rise to the fore at the sight of the recalcitrant attitude of the dalits. With 'extremists' being his phobia, he has, from the very beginning, been seeing the hand of naxalites in every act of protest, thereby unwittingly giving them more credit than is truly their due, though the presence of the revolutionary groups in the Chundur protest movement is an undeniable reality.

This SP shares with most of the new-generation policemen a certain understanding of democracy in which there is no place for the autonomous right of the people to choose the politics of their liking, nor to participate in political struggles for the betterment of their lives. Worse, his perception of democracy has no place for the separation of the judiciary from the executive, or even the gun-wielding executive from the pen-wielding one. He has publicly expressed the view that *all* executive powers should be handed over to IPS officers, and that the judiciary should subordinate itself to the interests and perceptions of the police. Any crank can express such or even worse views, but this is one man who has been doing his worst to implement these views with the threat of force and the implicit backing of the political government, and it is actions such as these which are gradually reshaping our democracy into a nation ruled by corrupt and greedy politicians supported by the brute power of the 'forces of law and order'. While in Nizamabad, he frequently used to issue press statements such as this one: 'I have come to know that in such and such village, the radicals are planning to occupy the land of so and so—or to take out a rally against the sale of liquor—I warn them hereby that if they go through with their plans there will be serious consequences. I have issued shoot-at-sight orders and will not tolerate any violation!' Sounding more like a mafia don issuing a threat to troublemakers, his words indicate that is what most police officers have actually become.

He has started assuming this role in Guntur. He has imposed unending prohibitory orders in the district, making it impossible for the dalits and their supporters to organise any public activity. Bandhs, dharnas, processions, public meetings, are all banned in the district, and nobody who is not a resident of Chundur is allowed to enter the village. The reply of the police to the charge of suppression is to point out that the activity of the samiti of the Forward Castes is also equally affected by the ban orders, and so there is no partiality. This is nonsense. The powerful and the dominant do not need to organise themselves politically, in defiance of ban orders or otherwise, for they are *structurally* organised; it is the oppressed and the weak who need to organise themselves explicitly, to overcome their structural disorganisation. If dharnas and public meetings are banned and broken up, processions are blocked, and those sitting on hunger strike are arrested under the ridiculous charge of 'attempting to commit suicide', the collective organisation that is essential for strengthening the weak becomes impossible, and into this vacuum step in the patronising leaders of the ruling party. SC MLAs and MPs have been dispatched by the chief minister in a bid to win over the helplessly disarmed agitators—in the tradition of Devendra sending *apsaras* to break up the *tapasyas* of undesirable persons, as a dalit of Chundur colourfully cited to press-people—and they make repeated bids to win them over. Their demand is: give up the agitation for the arrest of the police officers, cooperate with the judicial enquiry whose completion has now become a matter of prestige with the government, accept the amount of one lakh offered in compensation to the families of the slain, reject the leadership of 'outsiders' and 'trouble-makers', and go back home.

This is the present scenario as far as Chundur goes, and may tilt one way or the other in a day or two. Across the district—and also in the neighbouring districts—the Forward Caste landowners are in an aggressive mood, and the dalits are in a state of apprehension. The immediate political need is the creation of a militant organisation for ensuring dalit self-defence, village by village. Nobody has as yet even begun to organise them, though all the democratic forces in this state have been wholesomely vocal and active in organising protest demonstrations and solidarity meetings. They do have an important purpose to serve, but the real organisation of militant self-defence and resistance is not going to be very easy, and may indeed turn violent. But there is no option. The alternative, of trying to convince the lower middle class and middle class savarna farmers that their material interest lies in a class unity with the dalits, is a fruitless and pedantic solution. They do not think so, and will not really think so until they witness an exhibition of the strength of a militant political movement wedded to the goal of annihilation of caste and working concretely in defence of the life and livelihood of the dalits. The unity of the working and oppressed people is not an arithmetic unity but a political unity. It is only an arithmetic unity that starts with 50 per cent or more of the exploited people as its basis. A political unity can very well start, and indeed must start unless one's search for unity is confined to drawing room dialectics, with the most oppressed 10 per cent, and expand through a demonstration of its strength, staying power, and political acumen. That is likely to be a rather violent way of fabricating the unity of the toiling masses, but it is only the arithmetic unity of the working people that constitutes a peaceful 80 per cent versus 20 per cent. This would be true even without the caste system, but is particularly so in this benighted land of Manu.

See Appendix on page 472, 'From Karamchedu (1985) to Chundur (1991)', for a tabulated list of incidents of murder or large-scale arson perpetrated against dalits, tribals and OBCs by caste Hindus in Andhra Pradesh.

Krishna Yadav and Casteism[1]

Much has been written about the Krishna Yadav episode,[2] but there is still room for a few more reflections. The first is that it perhaps signifies the coming of age of the dalit or dalit–bahujan movement that no one except his own family has seriously come to the defence of Krishna Yadav by saying that the allegations against him are an upper caste conspiracy, or worse still, that there is nothing wrong if a leader from the dalit–bahujan communities does what upper caste leaders have been doing for decades. Such arguments only harm the cause of the anticaste movement, for any attempt to use it for defending unethical conduct robs it of its normative essence, and it is salutary for this fact to be wellrecognised now.

However, while such a defence is deservedly eschewed, it is not as if there is nothing to be said about the selective response to corruption in public life that turns around caste among other things. Sometime ago, there was a justified comment on the way in which Suddala Devaiah[3] was eased out of the Andhra Pradesh cabinet, whereas Kodela Siva Prasada Rao[4] was vehemently defended. Today, we again see the clear difference in the way the chief minister Chandrababu Naidu reacts to Krishna Yadav and Rama Subba Reddy.[5] If the stamps scam has done harm to the reliability and credibility of the system of property disposal, Rama Subba Reddy's crime belongs to the genre that has devastated public life in Rayalaseema for decades.

However, if one goes beyond Andhra Pradesh, one wonders why in recent times leaders belonging to the backward communities have been getting caught in corruption cases with a frequency that is disproportionate to their share in corruption. This is really quite striking. There were many villains in the *Tehelka* episode but only Bangaru Laxman[6] was caught by the camera. Most chief ministers of the current generation have abused their power left and right, but it appears that former Uttar Pradesh chief minister and Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayawati alone among them is going to 'count the prison bars', as the Telugu colloquialism puts it. Corruption, misappropriation of public funds, misuse of power, etc, are sins so well entrenched in our state polity that no one in power is altogether free from these vices, but again it is Krishna Yadav whom the law catches up with. One should not hasten to point out that what he has done is many times more serious than the more routine forms of abuse of power that all ruling party leaders indulge in. His is no doubt a serious offence, but as for the rest of them, we will know the seriousness of *their* misdoings only when the truth comes out. Until then, let us beware of the complacence which claims that the others do nothing more than take a 10 per cent cut from civil contractors, a form of misappropriation that is almost no longer regarded as such.

Is it the inexperience of the leaders belonging to the backward communities? After all, being successful as a corrupt public person is not as easy as it seems when one is discussing other people's misdeeds. The inexperienced may easily get caught. Is it that these leaders have fewer protectors than others not belonging to their communities? This too could be true. Certainly, there is little doubt that if the Maharashtra police had not caught on to the doings of Krishna Yadav, the TDP government, which could not but have known of what was happening, would probably have

[1] Unpublished article, written in 2003 for the *Indian Express*. Exact date unknown.

[2] Yadav was a Telugu Desam Party (TDP) MLA and ex-minister of Andhra Pradesh, who was arrested and charged by the Maharashtra police in 2003 for involvement in a multi-crore interstate scam involving printing fake special adhesive stamps, foreign bill stamps, insurance and share transfer stamps.

[3] A dalit TDP leader, Devaiah was dropped from the cabinet in 2002 when he was labour minister following murder charges against him.

[4] Rao, a kamma by caste, was the minister for health in the TDP government, and was facing several criminal charges.

[5] Reddy was minister in Naidu's cabinet and was also facing criminal charges.

[6] A dalit, he was the BJP party president at the time. He was caught on a hidden camera stashing away wads of currency notes.

ignored the scam much longer, but it is nevertheless possible that the protective mechanism which saves the corrupt in public life does not work as well in the case of Backward Castes (BCs) as in that of the upper castes.

Is it that society feels more outraged at such corruption since it expects the beneficiaries of the politics of social upliftment to behave themselves with such modesty as would become their station and not aspire to ape those who are ostensibly socially superior to them? That could be true, too. One often senses a subtly expressed grouse that there is something outrageous about people who ask for their share of power on grounds of equity and then go on to abuse it. Similar abuse by those who stake claim to power as a matter of inheritance does not seem half so outrageous.

In fact, one rather bluntly suspects that the misdeeds of the Krishna Yadavs, the Bangaru Laxmans and the Mayawatis get so much exposure because articulate society (which mostly constitutes upper castes) derives a certain pleasure from discussing the corrupt deeds of SC and BC leaders. On the one hand, it seems to puncture the righteousness that informs the expression dalit–bahujan, while on the other hand, the contempt for corruption that can be openly expressed merges quite neatly with the carefully hidden contempt for dalit–bahujan communities, and permits the latter to be expressed under the cover of the former.

It takes a particularly serious case of corruption to raise such questions, because people would be more careful in less serious cases. Raising them is not intended to defend what is objectionable about the case, but to ferret out hidden attitudes that have been declared as eradicated but still persist, much like malaria.

Why Not a Separate UN Charter Against Casteism?

Deccan Chronicle, 16 October 2001

The attempt of Indian dalit groups to persuade the United Nations to include untouchability and casteism in the category of racism or racism-related discrimination has generated a lively debate.[1] The government of India has opposed it because it goes against the ('we may be poor but we have a noble civilisation') image that it has been determinedly cultivating in international forums for the last fifty years. It does not say so, of course. It says instead that 'internationalising' the issue is unnecessary, for two rather spurious reasons. One is that India has constitutionally prohibited casteism and caste discrimination, and has enacted legislation to punish untouchability in whatever form it manifests itself. That is to say, when there are internal mechanisms for tackling the problem, why should it be internationalised? By the same token the UN need not be concerned about extra-judicial executions and custodial violence since there is no country which has not prohibited such atrocities in law. Concern for international human rights has nonetheless been expressed in these matters since the national laws are systematically violated.

The other argument is that treating casteism as a form of racism or

[1] This debate took place at the 'World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance', (known as WCAR) held under the auspices of the United Nations in Durban, South Africa, during August–September 2001.

racism-related discrimination would confuse and dilute the struggle against racism. By implication, the struggle against racism is somehow a very noble phenomenon which should not be sullied by dragging in untouchability and all that. Perhaps untouchability is merely a social problem whereas racism is a crime against humanity, and conflating the two would reduce the seriousness of the latter. Here, too, it is the discomfort of the official face of India more than anything else that is the prompting factor. It is not the fight against racism but India's image as a fighter against racism that is likely to get 'confused' if untouchability is talked about in international forums.

On the other hand, I would argue that treating casteism and untouchability as a form of racism would have the effect of obscuring the specificity of caste and casteism, and even otherwise there is no reason why caste discrimination, particularly untouchability, should not be treated in its own right as a crime against humanity instead of assimilating it with racism. After all, the UN is committed to opposing all forms of systematic discrimination and not merely those which resemble racism. Racism has occupied an important place in the UN's agenda because the origins of that phenomenon are traceable in part to the upsurge of popular revulsion for Nazism, and subsequently, that world body has also spearheaded international condemnation of racism in South Africa. These very legitimate reasons should not obscure the fact that racism is not alone at the nadir of discrimination. Casteism, as an issue that concerns one-sixth of the world's population and is an important ingredient of the social life of the second largest country in the world, should rightfully demand a place for itself in the UN's agenda, rather than as an Indian variant of a generic problem called racism.

Perhaps the dalit groups which are campaigning/lobbying for inclusion of casteism in the broad category of racism are motivated by three concerns. One is the practical consideration that the UN has already developed various norms and mechanisms to deal with racism, and the struggle against casteism can also use those structures if casteism is accepted as a form of racism. The second is the understandable desire to see India's Hindu establishment condemned in the same breath as the practitioners of apartheid. And the third is probably a certain theoretical understanding, namely, that casteism has its origin in the Arya–Dasa or Arya–Dravida divide, which, in turn, is a racist divide. This theory was very popular with the Tamil nonbrahmin movement, but there are not many social scientists/historians who would accept this theory of the origin of varna society. In fact, the issue of the origins of varna society remains an open question, unlike the question of the injury and injustice it has caused to the toiling people, on which there can be no two opinions outside the most rabidly brahminical circles.

However, there is no reason why India should not be called to account for casteism as a separate crime not assimilated to racism. There are at least two reasons for wanting to maintain the distinction. One is that racism has never been declared to be divinely ordained whereas caste is declared to have been created by God himself. The second is that even though race, like caste, carries with it notions of unequal worth, caste goes beyond that and sets up a hierarchy of modes of life including occupations centred around the notion of unequal inherent worth, unequal rights and unequal value. Hindu society must, therefore, be called to account for the entirety of its crime and not just for that part of it which is comparable to racism.

VII

The Question of Reservation

A Tangled Web

Subdivision of SC Reservation in AP

EPW, 25 March 2000

The mala–madiga conflict in Andhra Pradesh over the sharing of the reservation quota for Scheduled Castes (SCs) is by now a classic case study of what happens when problems that should best be resolved socially are thrust upon the shoulders of the law because of the intransigence of one side or the recklessness of both sides. It is not that the law is irrelevant for effecting a democratic resolution of social problems. After the social process of resolution has worked itself through to a broad consensus, the law can enter and consolidate what has already been resolved and thereby give it permanence, continuity and the assurance of authority. This would ensure that each new generation does not have to struggle for it again until an alteration of the solution is desired. In a situation wherein there is as yet no consensus, the law, if used judiciously and to a strictly limited extent, can also exert the pressure of authority and impel the social groups concerned to resolve the problem. If nothing else, it can make it an enforced habit among the affected persons to confront the problem head-on.

These are two legitimate roles that the law can play. But in the absence of a basic will among the social groups concerned to resolve the problem rather than fight it out, or in the face of the intransigence of one party in seeking a resolution to the problem, it would be ill advised to make the law a substitute for the lack of preparedness in the hope that it would somehow work magic. If this is done, it is bound to lead to the kind of convoluted

tangle that the 'categorisation'[1] issue has become in AP today. This would be so in the best of circumstances but particularly so when the law is an instrument in the hands of the kind of political executive that we have today—opportunist, unprincipled and always keen to derive political mileage by ostensibly tackling social problems.

The limitations of purely legal solutions to social problems is illustrated in a different dimension by the statutory provisions pertaining to untouchability and violence on women. Perhaps, there were many who honestly believed that the mere enactment of these laws would effectively change things. In any case, these laws were made on the basis of a seemingly progressive consensus in society. Unlike land reforms and caste-based reservation, which were (and in the case of reservation, still are) challenged vehemently by the losers of the privileges taken away thereby, nobody opposed the legislation against untouchability and untouchability-related offences or the one that takes a penal view of domestic violence on women. At any rate, no one did so vocally.

However, the laws have never worked smoothly because there never was any real consensus behind them; there was only the inability to oppose them with any legitimate argument. If the laws had been enacted today, perhaps the ideology of the Sangh Parivar[2] would have come in handy. But they were mercifully enacted well before the Babri Masjid[3] was pulled down.

In any case, the consequence of the lack of an honest consensus over the issue that untouchability and wife-beating are serious crimes has been that ensuring the implementation of these statutes has become an uphill task for dalits and women, respectively. As all activists know, it frequently requires one agitation for a First Information Report (FIR) to be properly booked, another for the suspects to be arrested, and yet another to ensure that a charge sheet is honestly drawn up. All this would occur provided the victim is not in the meantime beaten down by social and possibly physical pressure to give up and join the mainstream of pliant servitude. The plain fact is that the enforcers of the law have little enthusiasm for implementing these laws, and even the judiciary is not always an exception.

On the other hand, the very existence of these statutes has, if nothing else, forced society to constantly contemplate these crimes, make it a habit to perceive and think of them as crimes, and act accordingly. This in itself can help wear down the resistance to change. The laws are, therefore, far from being useless or disposable: a constant pinprick undoubtedly has some use, apart from achieving an occasional success in prosecution. And the force of penal legislation was perhaps the least uncivilised force that could have been used against the holders of the inhuman privileges rendered culpable thereby.

The subdivision of reservation for dalits lies in a slightly different category. This is a matter not of oppression but of inequality among the oppressed, though structured in an oppressive manner, given the ladder-like structure of the caste system from the top to the bottom. What was needed was acceptance by the relatively wellplaced among the dalits of the fact that the demand of the more disadvantaged was just. A law-enforcing equality in the absence of such an acceptance would be tortuous in being drafted and lame in being implemented.

Without doubt, such an equality would have its efficacy, if nothing else, in making contemplation of the demand and some degree of concession to it a habit. In any case, those who are at the receiving end of inequality can never be convinced of the fact that what is usually called the 'majesty of the law' must await the consent of the mortals on the other side, who have no reason for being in a hurry to yield to the demand for equality. And yet the structuring of such a law is bound to be painfully protracted, and the said law is likely to be equally painfully hobbled in its functioning.

There are fifty-nine castes listed in the Scheduled Caste Order pertaining to AP. The malas and the madigas are, by far, the largest of these castes. Together, these castes constitute about 80 per cent of the SC population of the state. The problem of subdivision has, therefore, taken on the contours of a mala–madiga conflict. According to the 1981 census (no more recent break-up of the populations of individual SCs seems to be available), the malas numbered 28.94 lakh, the madigas 35.72 lakh, and the remaining fifty-seven SCs together about 15 lakh, with the total dalit population being 79.61 lakh. Among these other castes, the relli community, which is preponderant in the three northern coastal districts of the state, is somewhat sizeable. Although these figures are nearly twenty years old, there is no reason to believe that the relative proportions of the various communities within the dalit population have changed to any appreciable extent since then.

The malas and the madigas are both 'untouchable' and suffer equally all the indignities of being outcastes. The savarna Hindus have never differentiated between the malas and the madigas—or any of the dalit castes, for that matter—in the treatment meted out to them as outcastes. However,

[1] Refers to classification of the SCs into four categories for purposes of reservation in government jobs and educational institutions.
[2] The 'family' of Right-wing Hindu organisations spawned by and affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.
[3] A mosque at Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh that was demolished by right-wing Hindu fanatics on 6 December 1992.

there is not only a difference in occupations but also a miniature hierarchy within the dalits that puts the malas on the upper rungs of the ladder (to use Ambedkar's felicitous metaphor) and the madigas down below. The madigas are outcastes for the malas, just as there are castes even lower than the madigas, which are outcastes for the madigas.

Irrespective of whatever be the historical origin of this ladder-like system of Hindu society, it has long been recognised that it has had the effect of ensuring that Hindu society reproduces itself stably. It has successfully legitimised subservience to superiors by placing somebody beneath all but the lowest rung. To rebel against one's caste superiors is to open the gates—at least the gates of moral sanction—for the rebellion of those belonging to one's inferior caste against oneself. Psychologically, the caste oppressor is not an unbridgeable alien, which he needs to be to provoke outright rebellion, for he is a part of everybody's identity. To condemn oppression is to condemn at least a little bit of oneself.

This unwelcome burden, coupled with the arch-conservative notion of dharma, which sanctifies the ladder of Hindu society as a definitive of divinely ordained righteousness, has acted as an inbuilt deterrent against rebellion. The option of understanding these psychological barriers as being merely an ideological reflection of the physical fear of the rebellion of those below may be left open to those who like to package social history in neat rationalisations.

'Merit' Argument

However, no deterrent, physical or psychological, is ever perfect, and Hindu society has never been buffeted by shocks of rebellion from those down below on the caste ladder. What is remarkable is that whenever caste domination has been questioned, it has been justified by the notion that the holders of privilege have some quality called 'merit' that justifies the privilege. In the old days, it was the merit of past deeds translated into a nobler birth and ritual purity in this life; today it is the merit of hard work, intelligence and efficiency. It is always something they have that justifies the privilege; it is never the pre-existing social structure of differential privilege in which all are placed by virtue of the accident of birth.

The modern argument of selfless hard work and consequent capability and efficiency was first discovered by the brahmins in answer to nonbrahmin rebels (or interrogators, to use currently fashionable language) in the Tamil society of the early twentieth century. It has ever since been the answer of holders of privilege at each rung of the ladder. The upper sudras joined the brahmins in hurling this argument at the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), with the most recent instance in memory being the campaign in the northern states against the Mandal Commission's recommendations, by far the ugliest political movement of modern India.

Now some of the malas in AP are using the same argument. Mala youths belonging to villages in East and West Godavari districts, wherein the conflict assumed a physical form for a while, were asked why they were not prepared to accept the legitimate complaint of the madigas that the malas availed themselves of an unduly large proportion quota. The malas replied that the madigas 'eat beef, drink and loaf around, whereas we work hard'.

It was in 1995 that the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) emerged on the scene. It declared that the mala community was disproportionately availing itself of the quota of reservation for SCs and demanded that the 15 per cent quota allotted to the SCs in the state be subdivided and that fixed quotas be allotted to properly identified subgroups of the fifty-nine dalit communities. This demand itself is not new. It appears to have first been placed before the then chief minister of the state as far back as in 1972. Subsequently, determined legislators and other public figures from the madiga community have been submitting representations to each successive chief minister. But this is the first time that it assumed the form of a mass movement. And what a remarkable effort it was while it lasted!

The movement began with some advantages. Firstly, like the malas, the madigas are spread across the state. If not every village, then certainly every second or third village in every corner of the state would have at least a few madiga families. Secondly, though the reality of a hierarchy within the outcastes and unequal access to reservation was known, felt and even mildly articulated for a long time, it was being expressed as a mass upsurge only for the first time. It is a matter of common experience that a mass expression of a genuine public grievance for the first time attracts the most innocent and purest following, and also the most disinterested sympathy from the rest of society. It is in the course of the second or third round that the expression and the sympathy are contaminated by what occurs in the meantime and by self-serving afterthoughts.

Thirdly, the demand that the madigas raised was plain, simple and easily understood—'divide up the SC reservation quota and give us our due'. It was moreover felt to be unproblematic since the Backward Class (BC) reservation in the state has long since been subdivided into four subgroups, a subdivision that has been upheld by the Supreme Court. Fourthly, the madigas found a dynamic and charismatic leader in Manda Krishna. A

former Radical[4] from Warangal, who was later suspected and shunned by the Radicals and who thought it safer as a consequence to leave the district and settle down at Ongole, Krishna rose very fast as the founder and enviably popular leader of the MRPS. His lieutenant was Krupakar, also a former activist of a pro-naxalite student organisation, who was a less charismatic and less dynamic young man than Krishna but a capable and dedicated organiser nevertheless.

The movement took the state by storm in a matter of months. The first and most audacious thing that the madigas did was to suffix the caste tag to their names. Krishna became Krishna Madiga, Krupakar became Krupakar Madiga, and so on down the line. In a society that addresses any number of Krishna Shastris and Krishna Reddys respectfully, the discomfort this caused was most amusing to watch. As 'madiga' has served as a term of abuse, whether directed against a madiga or otherwise, it was most discomfiting to be confronted by someone who wanted you to address him as 'Krishna Madiga'. And when people confessed to themselves that they found it embarrassingly absurd to think of someone as Krishna Madiga, they were forced to ask themselves why they did not find it absurd to think of someone as Krishna Shastri, Krishna Reddy or Krishna Naidu.

Since true victory over an oppressor lies not in putting a bullet through his head but in making him turn a self-critical eye towards his own pretensions to superiority, it must be said that this deliberately chosen tactic of the madiga movement did as much as anything has ever done to puncture upper caste arrogance.

On the other hand, there was a false note from the very beginning, though being at the beginning made it perceptibly understandable. All movements, it appears, require a suitable image of an evil enemy to sustain themselves. The madiga movement conjured up the image of the oppressive, cunning and selfish mala, who by craft and deceit took away all the benefits given by the state to the SCs. It is a fact that the madigas, apart from not being able to avail thereselves of reservation in proportion to their numbers among the SCs, also suffered the indignity of being looked down upon by the malas. This 'local' hierarchy, which may legitimately be treated as the manifestation of a micro-level inequality by those studying the caste system as a whole, would not necessarily be perceived as merely 'local' or 'micro' by those who belong to that level.

This much is understandable. But what is the rhetoric that isolates the malas from the caste system as a whole and projects them as the principal enemies of the madigas. The madiga leaders even said that the neo-brahmin is more dangerous than the brahmin, which is why the mala is a bigger enemy. Regardless of whether or not the neo-brahmin is truly more dangerous than the original brahmin, applying that appellation to the malas was absurd. The madiga demand, as far as reservation is concerned, could well have been expressed by saying that the differential social positions of the various dalit communities made it impossible for all of them to have equal access to reservation and that it was therefore necessary to divide up the reservation quota and ensure its due for each properly constituted subgroup. The madiga demand could thus have been justified through an appeal to the same logic that motivated the provision of reservation in the first place. But would such a sanitised and merely rational expression of the demand, apart from failing to adequately express the madigas' long-standing resentment at being looked down upon by their fellow outcastes, evoke the mass emotional response required to create and sustain a mass movement? Perhaps the movement would have been possible without the tangible image of a personalised enemy and if it had been based on a purely rational motivation. But would it not then be difficult to tide over internal differences or inconvenient organisational crises?

However, from where does this realisation of the functional utility of such an image spring before any troubles have been sighted? Or is it the leader or leaders that need a tangible enemy to project themselves as indispensable, as valiant fighters around whom all should rally? Perhaps the image helps discredit all challenge to their leadership as a conspiracy of the enemy? Or are we talking of a purely human trait, which has nothing to do with the possibility or otherwise of a mass movement—the inability easily to conceive of injustice done to oneself without seeing behind it the sinister machinations of an evil one?

These are interesting questions to ponder over, though the tradition of Indian intellectuals who consider themselves close to popular movements is to view only their political aspects. Subjecting movements to a social-psychological critique, much less a moral critique or analysis, is foreign to that tradition. The greater is the pity, since such a critique would serve a very educative purpose.

Even more disturbing than the way in which the madigas articulated their demand was the response of the malas to the movement. There were a few honourable exceptions, especially among the activists of the left, democratic and dalit organisations who belonged to that caste. But those whose stand could well have made a substantial difference to the trajectory

[4] Term used to describe youth activists of the People's War Group (PWG), a maoist political party.

of the agitation were the top leaders of the vibrant dalit movement of the state. Almost all these top leaders are from the mala community, a fact which again reflects the dominant position in which that community is placed among the dalits of AP. A positive response from them in keeping with the principle of social justice would have initiated a process that may well have structured a consensus among the dalits on the demand of the madigas. The social resolution mentioned at the beginning could have come only through them, if at all. But they did not rise to the occasion.

Granting these leaders their bona fides, one can well understand their predicament. The unemployed youth of their community, who are dependent almost exclusively on reservation for their employment prospects, would certainly not have taken kindly to any concession to the demand of the MRPS. This meant that the standing of the leaders would be at stake if they were to take a stand sympathetic to the madigas. But, as the experience of those who are less highly placed in the dalit movement and mala activists in other democratic movements who did take a positive stand has shown, the difficulty was not really insuperable. After some initial hostility and even ostracism, their stand was accepted by people of their caste. In any case, the silence of the dalit leadership makes one only wish that some of them at least had had the courage to speak out.

One answer that is frequently given to this complaint is that if they had indeed taken a stand, they would have lost their relevance as leaders of their community, and subsequent events would also not have taken any different course. But one is not talking of merely declaring a stand in support of a genuine demand. If a concerted effort had been made on that basis to begin a process of reconciliation guided by the larger need of unity among the dalit communities to face the discrimination and physical atrocities that are their common lot, perhaps events would have taken a smoother course.

Counter-campaign

In the event, almost all the important dalit leaders of the state remained mute spectators, and the gap was filled by P.V. Rao, a government servant, who certainly did not have the kind of experience in organising a mass dalit movement that the others had, which would have helped temper any tendency to extremism. He formed the Mala Mahanadu and went about organising a 'no-holds-barred' campaign against the demands of the MRPS.

The campaign was based on a mixture of partly reasonable but mostly imagined or invented arguments. Strong objection was taken to the picture created of the cunning and scheming mala as the root of the unequal access

to reservation, and rightly so. It was also argued plausibly that what is seen as a mala–madiga difference is, in fact, a regional difference that cannot be cured by a horizontal subdivision of the SC reservation quota. It is a fact that there is a relative preponderance of the mala community among dalits in the coastal districts who are economically and educationally more developed than the madigas, who are more extensively found in the backward Telangana and Rayalaseema regions. And the scavenging caste of rellis, who lag behind even the madigas, is confined to the three north coastal districts, which are extremely backward socially, notwithstanding the presence of a sizeable industrial city in Visakhapatnam. But this plausible argument turns out to be inconsequential when it is seen that even within a given region, there is not only social inequality among the dalit castes but also inequality in the relative proportions of members of each community availing themselves of reservation.

The rest of the Mala Mahanadu's arguments have little persuasive value. It was said that whereas the madigas had a vocation (leather work) of their own wherein they could receive further aid from the government if their advancement was desired, the malas had no caste vocation and had to compete with others as agricultural labourers. The fact that the madigas are leather workers by caste is true, but then the leather work they do including skinning dead cattle, tanning hides, and making and repairing chappals by hand has hardly been a propellant of social advance even if it has been aided (as has occasionally been the case) by government loans.

Reservation in education and employment has been sought and justified on both social and economic grounds. Reservation has been viewed as an instrument for helping the toiling castes to move out of the confines of inherited modes of low-paying toil based largely on traditional technology and commanding little social regard or opportunity of wider knowledge or social advancement within Hindu society. They have been regarded as a passport to a mode of life that is more productive and hence more remunerative, and one which signifies greater status as well as opportunities for the expansion of knowledge and skills, and for further social advance. This has nothing to do with acquiescence in the brahminical ideology of degradation of manual skill and the knowledge it carries. Resisting that degradation and asserting the self-respect of all the toil and knowledge-based skill that it involves does not, on the other hand, imply acceptance of stagnation at the level ordained by caste.

It is no answer, therefore, to say, 'give the madigas more loans to buy better implements and make more chappals per day'. Those who continue to make chappals would certainly seek such assistance, and would demand

respect from society for their skill and toil. But the community as a whole is entitled to ask for special provisions for sharing the wider province of knowledge and skills and for partaking of the consequent economic and social advancement.

In any case, the Mahanadu's plea is the following argument made first by the brahmins and later by the other upper castes against reservation as such: give them help for economic upliftment, and we too will learn to honour the dignity of labour, but do not breach our preserve of expanding knowledge and the status and opportunities it carries. The argument as well as the answer to it would become clearer if one goes below the madigas to castes such as the rellis, who have as their exclusive vocation scavenging, in which they face no threat of competition. Nor do the rellis have any scope for advancement if they remain scavengers.

It was also argued that instead of fighting among themselves for subdividing their common quota, dalits should jointly fight for increasing the SC quota commensurate with the proportionate increase in the dalit population and for a proper implementation of reservation, including the backlog of unfilled vacancies. There is no reason, however, as to why the desire for justice *inter se* should wait for the fulfilment of the latter task or tasks. The desire and the tasks can proceed together, provided both sides, particularly the more privileged side, make sure that the struggle for subdivision and the response to it do not vitiate the atmosphere to the extent of making the united struggle for the common goals impossible.

In any case, this is again no different in principle from the argument offered by the upper caste anti-reservationists: let us fight not over division of the existing job opportunities but for the creation of more. The two struggles can well go together, and the onus of making this possible lies on the more privileged and not the less privileged. To ask the disadvantaged to give up their just demand of equal opportunity in order to pave the way for the unity required for a common fight for greater opportunities is plainly unethical.

However, the most commonly heard and least justified argument was that the entire madiga movement was a creature of chief minister Chandrababu Naidu. It is true that the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has always been on the lookout for exploiting the social gaps left by the Congress. The dalit support for the Congress since the days of Indira Gandhi was structured through the rural dalit leadership, which was mostly mala by caste. Hence, there was ample opportunity for the TDP to attract the support of the madigas. For this reason, Naidu, a politician as crafty as they come, responded sympathetically to the MRPS. To stand this on its head and damn the MRPS as a creature of his, however, lacks any justification.

In the meantime, the MRPS went from strength to strength, quite successfully putting pressure on political parties and other organisations in the public arena to support its demands. Most parties and organisations extended verbal support, if only because they could find no argument to answer the demands. The state legislative assembly unanimously passed a resolution supporting the demand. The state government, which in any case perceived that political mileage could be derived from it, set up a judicial commission of enquiry, the Ramachandra Raju Commission, to enquire into the allegation that a few SCs were securing disproportionate benefit from reservation to the detriment of the others.

Set up through a Government order (GO) issued on 10 September 1996, the commission submitted its report, which substantially agreed with the complaint of the madigas, to the government in May 1997. On 6 June 1997, the government issued a GO subdividing the 15 per cent quota of reservation given to the SCs into four categories. Group A was to consist of relli and related castes (twelve in number), mostly scavengers by vocation, identified as the most disadvantaged, who would get 1 per cent and be placed in the first of the roster slots allotted to SCs; group B was to consist of the madigas and related castes (eighteen in number), who would get 7 per cent; group C, consisting of malas and related castes (twenty-five in number), would get 6 per cent; and group D, consisting of adi andhras and related castes (four in number), identified as those who had benefited the most from reservation, would get 1 per cent and the last of the roster points allotted to SCs. Groups A and B were identified as having got less than proportionate benefit from reservation and groups C and D as having got more than proportionate benefit.

The Mala Mahanadu, predictably, then went to court. On 18 September 1997 a full bench of the Andhra Pradesh High Court delivered a judgement characterised by convoluted logic, holding that the GO was *ultra vires* of the state government's powers and unconstitutional. The only reasonable point made by the court was that the state government should have consulted the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the SC and ST Commission) before taking the decision to effect the categorisation. Article 338(9) of the Constitution says that the government shall consult the commission on all major policy matters concerning SCs and STs. It was argued by the state government before the bench that the categorisation was not a major policy matter, and alternatively that the word 'shall' need not be interpreted as mandatory.

Irrespective of the technicalities of interpretation, the court laid down a

sound principle in insisting that Section 338(9) was a mandatory provision. But instead of holding the GO unconstitutional on the ground of non-consultation, it could have upheld it prospectively subject to consultation within a reasonable time period, and directed the government to enforce it only thereafter, if it still wished to. Article 338 makes it clear that the opinion of the SC and ST Commission on matters pertaining to the safeguards provided for SCs and STs is not binding on the government. The latter may differ with this opinion, but it must, therefore, explain the reasons to the state assembly. But the high court found a very odd argument to hold that the GO was even otherwise *ultra vires* of the powers of the state government.

Article 341 makes it clear that the list of SCs, declared by the president, can be modified only by parliament. But that is not what the government sought to do. The list would not be altered in any way. Only the 15 per cent reservation of seats and jobs for the castes in the list would be apportioned among them in a more equitable manner by setting fixed proportions apart for their subgroups that are distinguished by disparity in their ability to avail themselves of reservation when bunched together. The legality of such subdivision of castes into backward and more backward for the purpose of equitable subdivision of the reservation quota has been upheld on more than one occasion by the Supreme Court, with the most recent judgment being that of the nine-judge Constitution Bench in the Mandal Commission[5] case.

The Andhra Pradesh High Court did not go against the Supreme Court's view. It was argued, however, that such a subdivision was permissible only in the case of BCs and not in that of SCs. The court held that the recognition of certain castes as SCs by the president was tantamount to identifying them as the (absolutely) most backward among all the castes; and this being the defining characteristic of the SC, any further identification of the more backward among them would amount to cutting down the list declared by the president, thereby effectively putting the others outside the SC list. It would be hard to come by a more peculiar mode of judicial reasoning than this, which led to the conclusion that the state government had exercised a power that only parliament had the right to exercise.

[5] In *Indira Sawhney* vs *Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477, six of the nine judges of the Supreme Court upheld the provision of reservation to OBCs to the extent of 27 per cent in central government services. They took a realistic view of caste as an institution of Indian society, its discriminatory character, the need to overcome it, and the role that special provisions such as reservation can play in that task. The Mandal Commission had fixed a quota for members of the BCs in jobs in the public sector to redress the issue of caste discrimination.

As a matter of fact, there is nothing in the Constitution or administrative practice to support the view that SCs are defined by a degree of social-cum-educational backwardness along a scale applicable to all castes. The SCs have always been identified by untouchability, which is an absolute characteristic. It is arguable that there are some non-SCs such as nomadic communities, plains tribes and denotified communities which are socially and educationally more backward than the SCs, but they have been included in the BC and not the SC list because they are not outcastes. In Hindu social practice, there is a clear and unambiguous distinction between savarna (however lowly) and 'panchama',[6] and that is the basis on which the SCs have been identified.

Physical Conflicts

In the entire literature on the administrative and judicial understanding of caste, it would be hard to come by the thesis that it is the degree of backwardness (howsoever defined and howsoever measured) along a scale applicable to all communities that defines an SC. The discussions in the Constituent Assembly show that 'Scheduled Castes' was intended to be another name for what in those days were called the Depressed Classes, that is, the outcastes. In any case, untouchability has always been regarded as the principal defining characteristic of SCs. Being an outcaste is an absolute disability and not a question of degree along a universal scale.

Within this absolute category of untouchables, there may well be relative backwardness, as measured by relevant indices. The recognition of this reality does not, by any means, put the relatively more developed people outside the list of panchamas. They continue to be untouchable despite there being untouchables who are more backward than them. In fact, the only support found by the high court for its opinion is the rhetorical description of the SCs as the 'backwardmost', the abysmally backward, the lowliest of castes, etc, by the Supreme Court in certain judgements. Most of these judgements were rendered by V.R. Krishna Iyer, a judge who had his heart in the right place but who was notoriously given to rhetorical expression in the service of judicial sensitivity to the problems of the disadvantaged.

Saying that the backwardmost of the castes are designated as SCs by the president, as Krishna Iyer has said in the judgements relied upon by the high court, can be taken as rhetorical acknowledgement of the unparalleled plight of the dalits, or, more literally, to mean that untouchability, the

[6] The 'fifth' category, considered untouchable and placed below the four varnas (savarnas) of brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas and sudras.

principal defining characteristic of the SCs, makes them the lowliest, the backwardmost, etc. It is a rather strange procedure of interpretation that performs a semantic reversal and turns this descriptive or rhetorical expression into a definitive characteristic, while arguing that there is some scale of backwardness on which the castes are placed, that those found in the bottom slot are declared as SCs, and that any further recognition of degrees of backwardness within that category amounts to putting some of the lowliest above the lowest and, therefore, outside the list of SCs. But perhaps this is what results from the kind of adjudicative machinery operating in our country, which expects judges, who decide legal issues arising from social problems, to be sociologists, anthropologists, historians, economists and environmentalists in addition to being jurists—and all this with the sole help of lawyers whose principal talent lies in quibbling.

After the GO was struck down by the high court, there were physical conflicts during the last week of September and the first week of October 1997 between the two principal dalit communities in the East and West Godavari districts. The trouble broke out when mala youths, while celebrating 'their victory in the high court', made provocative comments or indulged in provocative modes of expressing their glee, thereby rubbing salt into the wounds of the vanquished. One madiga youth, Chelluru Mira Sayabu of Chintalacheruvu in East Godavari district, was clubbed to death by some mala youths on 6 October and in some villages of the neighbouring West Godavari district, non-fatal attacks took place in retaliation. It was basically a case of those who were numerically preponderant in the particular village taking it out on the other side in celebration or resentment, as the case may be.

Mercifully, this phase was short-lived. In most parts of the state, except a few of the coastal districts, higher education and government employment seem so remote to all but a small minority of youths among any of the fifty-nine dalit castes that the possibility of the conflict going beyond mutual resentment was unlikely. But this is not to say that resentment and some degree of bad blood have not come to stay as definitive components of the relation between the relatively well placed and the relatively disadvantaged among the dalits, mainly the malas and the madigas.

Indeed, this is one of the unfortunate consequences of dependence for a solution to the problem solely on the law and administrative action, without any support for any effort to work out a social consensus. However, the blame for this must be ascribed not to those who pressed for an immediate administrative resolution but to those who made no effort to resolve it while even refusing to acknowledge the very existence of a problem.

The state government, which had sought for and obtained a certificate of appeal from the high court, filed an appeal in the Supreme Court. But it evidently realised that one of the objections raised by the high court—that the SC and ST Commission should have been consulted before making the categorisation—would be upheld by the apex court. It, therefore, simultaneously sought the opinion of the commission. The commission refused to give its opinion before the Supreme Court as the matter was *sub judice*. The government, therefore, withdrew the appeal in the Supreme Court on 11 February 1998 and pursued the matter with the commission. The commission asked for more data, which the government took some time to collect.

Meanwhile, the MRPS undertook further agitation to exert pressure on the government to 'somehow or the other get the categorisation approved'. Chandrababu Naidu was called a liar and a cheat. He was said to have sold out the interests of the madigas after having taken the support of the MRPS in the mid-term parliamentary elections of 1998. Krishna Madiga staged a hunger strike in June 1998, and for the first time openly encouraged madiga youths to indulge in violence. A madiga youth, Tellabandla Ravi, immolated himself at Tadipatri, in Anantapur district.

Since the TDP has joined every non-Congress alliance at the centre since Naidu took over its reins, the MRPS claimed that the chief minister could have obtained the central government's approval for the categorisation, had he been really sincere. While it is true that Naidu's original enthusiasm for the demand of the MRPS was opportunistic, it is probable that the MRPS leadership did not fully appreciate the tangle that the state government had got caught in because of the high court judgement; nor did it seem to realise that once the issue got stalled on the basis of legal considerations, whether of a procedural or a substantive nature, any attempt to hurry it by political pressure or manipulation could only boomerang. But perhaps any such considerations would have been regarded as unworthy of militant fighters, for competitive militancy is a compulsion that people's movements suffer from.

The end result of these events of June 1998 was that madiga youths across the state got arrested on charges of violence and that the movement lost some public sympathy for its perceived unwillingness to comprehend the legal odds that the state government was wrestling with. When the government, under pressure from Krishna Madiga's fast, declared that it would do its best to expedite the process at the SC and ST Commission, the chairperson of the commission declared in a huff that he could not be pressured. The state government even took the avoidable step of moving

the high court for issuing a direction to the SC and ST Commission to expedite its report.

Irrespective of whether or not the commission had delayed matters needlessly, the pressure tactics of the MRPS gave the Mala Mahanadu, at the next round of litigation which is now on, grounds for alleging lack of effective consultation with the SC and ST Commission on account of pressure. Perhaps the only positive outcome of the MRPS pressure was that the state government sent the data called for by the commission sooner than it might otherwise have done.

These events also resulted in the internal crisis of the MRPS coming to a head. By then, Krishna Madiga was being perceived by his colleagues as a vain, autocratic and dictatorial person, who never sought their views on anything. Nor, it was said, did he respect the decisions of the executive body of the organisation. More disreputable allegations were made against Krishna Madiga, claiming that he had entered into unnamed deals with Naidu in return for MRPS support during the parliament polls of 1998. Very soon thereafter, the madiga movement split, with one faction going with Krishna Madiga, and another with Krupakar Madiga, while many madigas became inactive out of disgust.

More trouble was in store for the movement. The SC and ST Commission invited opinions on the matter, and after giving a hearing to all parties, advised the state government against the categorisation. It is true that Article 338(7) allows a state government to reject a recommendation of the SC and ST Commission, provided the reasons for the same are explained to the legislative assembly. But there is no gainsaying the fact that one more ground is now available with the Mala Mahanadu for questioning the bona fides of the government in a court of law. Such a challenge may or may not succeed in stalling the measure, but it can certainly succeed in delaying matters further.

In order to minimise the likely damage, the state government this time around chose the legislative route: it drafted, and sent for the governor's assent, an ordinance instead of an executive order that it had sent in the first round: legislative satisfaction is not on the same footing as executive satisfaction in the matter of judicial review. If the governor had signed it, the matter would no doubt have again gone to court, for only one of the grounds on which the previous GO was struck down had been taken care of by the consultation with the SC and ST Commission. The state government really had no option but to clear this one reasonable hurdle and then go through the high court–Supreme Court rigmarole to deal with the other hurdle contrived by the full bench judgement.

However, governor C. Rangarajan decided to put one more spoke in the wheel. He referred the ordinance to the president for his assent. There is nothing in the law or the Constitution which says that he should have done so, for the opinion expressed by the high court on the previous occasion is not law, regardless of howsoever weighty it may be as a judicial opinion. But the banker in Rangarajan, who had been a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, probably dictated that caution is the better part of constitutional valour.

After the governor's action, gloom descended on the already dispirited madiga movement. The madigas were afraid that the act of the governor spelt the end of the matter, for there was no way they could put pressure on the union government as they had done very effectively on the state government. It was also felt that presidential assent, which would, in effect, be the assent of the central government, would not be easily forthcoming. It was believed that the fear of likely repercussions on SC reservation all over the country would inhibit an early decision, especially in view of the unstable and perpetually crisis-ridden character of the governments in Delhi.

The MRPS splinters went into hibernation. Krishna Madiga turned to what one may call mainstream dalit politics, that is, striking up alliances with putative political representatives of various BC communities and forming electoral fronts on the assumption that votes proportionate to the population of the said BC community would drop into the front's lap. The novelty he invented was to invite vaisyas into the front (he even considered brahmins for a while) on the basis of the theory that the reddys and kammas had rendered everybody else politically backward. That absurd novelty apart, dalit leaders apparently never tire of this political make-believe, and most of them are content to live off it forever. So too would Krishna Madiga have been perhaps, but after about a year's gap, the president sprang a surprise by giving assent to the proposal of the state government. As the earlier ordinance drafted in September 1998 had in the meantime lapsed anyway, the state government hastily redrafted it and promulgated it on 9 December 1999.

However, if parliament alone has the power to legislate categorisation of SC reservation, as held by the AP High Court in the earlier judgement, presidential assent cannot solve the problem of the state's lack of legislative power, and the Mala Mahanadu's ground for challenging the ordinance survives, however tenuous may be its logic. The Mahanadu has gone to court, and the matter is once again before the high court. Irrespective of the outcome, it will certainly go to the Supreme Court.[7] There is no saying

[7] In November 2000, a full bench of the Andhra Pradesh high court headed by Chief Justice

how much time the whole process may take. Given the prevalent state of judicial understanding of the matter, the madigas will, in all probability, succeed in the end, but theirs may well be an empty victory by the time it comes, for reservation is available only in government (or government-financed) educational institutions and government jobs. This field is being shrunk as a matter of policy. And even if these opportunities do survive after the few years more that the litigation is bound to take, by that time, the state government would probably have fully enforced the currently touted system of not making regular recruitments but giving jobs on contract. While the courts till now have taken a more or less firm stand against regularisation of persons employed on an ad hoc or contractual basis without following the reservation roster, among other requirements of eligibility, what the fate of the rule of reservation would be when all employment becomes contractual, without guarantee of tenure and possibility of regularisation, is a big question mark.

M.S. Liberhan, in a majority 4–1 judgement, upheld the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes Rationalisation of Reservation Act, passed in April 2000, providing for classification of SCs into four categories. The high court bench dismissed a writ petition filed by leaders of the Mala Mahanadu. However, in November 2004, the Supreme Court quashed the Andhra Pradesh Act; a five-judge Constitution Bench held that the micro-classification of SCs was unconstitutional. The bench, headed by Justice N. Santosh Hegde, ruled that in the context of members of the SCs being the most backward among the backward classes, it was not permissible for the government to further classify them into subgroups. For Balagopal's analysis of these developments, see the essay 'Justice for Dalits Among Dalits' later in Section VII of this volume.

In Safe Hands

Breast-beating Over the OBC Quota

Indian Express, 12 October 2000

There is a world of difference between how much the state is actually doing by way of social welfare or protective discrimination for the disadvantaged, and how much the privileged classes allege that it is doing. Listening to the disgruntled complaints of the latter (always expressed, of course, in the idiom of national interest and never their self-interest), one would think that the entire polity and economy have been handed over to the underprivileged, to the detriment of the developmental interests of the 'nation'. All that is needed for the sententious outbursts of the privileged is the enactment of a law, the declaration of a policy, or even a mere poll promise. Since nobody bothers to examine how much is in fact done, the underprivileged are losers on both counts—they get hardly a fraction of what they are alleged to be getting, but are held responsible for the country's failure to develop rapidly, a blame that is supported by neither reason nor facts.

The fate of the Mandal Commission recommendations in central universities is a case in point. We hear frequently of the 'Mandalisation' of the country's polity and the economy, a pejorative expression, which denotes that the Mandal Commission and its political fallout have wrought disaster upon the nation. The reservation provided by the union government following the commission's recommendations is regarded as an undesirable instance of buckling under political blackmail, notwithstanding the fact

that the reservation has withstood the scrutiny of a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court.

Even less known or considered is the actual fate of the reservation policy made after so much fuss and turmoil. It is merely assumed that they are being given, and that the country is so much the worse for it. Educational institutions, which have always had a much worse record of implementation of reservation than even the least visible department of the government, are again at the forefront in this duplicity. It is in the staff rooms—and often the classrooms too of those institutions, which constitute the strongest bastion of brahminism—that one hears the most agitated breast-beating about the ill effects of reservation, and yet it is educational institutions that have most successfully escaped the constitutional obligation. Others merely beat their breasts about reservations, but educational administrators, that is, the intellectual elite of the country, are proactive in obstructing them.

The central government's order directing implementation of 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in all central government institutions was issued in 1993. In December 1994, the government issued a clarification that the order also applies to educational institutions under the jurisdiction of the central government. Yet, nearly six years later, not a single central university in the country is providing reservations for OBCs in teaching posts. When questioned, each one of them triumphantly points to all the others, and says, 'We are not giving [reservation] because nobody else is giving [them].' Such self-justifying unity in defrauding the law has neither legal nor moral justification but educational administrators (most of whom moralise about the Rule of Law at the drop of a hat) feel no sense of shame while indulging in it.

They have developed a simple device to this end: they claim that they are awaiting clarifications from the University Grants Commission (UGC), whose directives are binding on them. But the UGC is governed by an Act, which says that the national policy directives of the central government are binding on the UGC, and therefore *a fortiori* on the universities, and all universities have on their rolls professors of law, who should be able to explain this much to the decision-makers, but such simple logic does not work against the obduracy of continuing with entrenched privileges.

As for the UGC, that august institution is apparently not answerable to anyone, including the Constitution. These days, it is imbued in full measure with the spirit of market-driven efficiency. It declared a few weeks ago that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes would get no reservation in research programmes, and changed its mind only when there was a lot of public protest. It has also declared its commitment to 'merit' at all costs by withdrawing an old concession available to blind students who manage to reach the stage of an M.Phil. or a Ph.D. programme, namely, that they need not pass the National Eligibility Test (NET) examination, as is compulsory for others. This measure was undertaken soon after parliament, prompted by an international covenant, passed an Act making it obligatory on all instrumentalities of the state to give special facilities to the physically handicapped. However, this stipulation in the Act is pushing universities to switch over as rapidly as possible to self-financed courses, which are accessible only to those who can finance them.

The portals of educational institutions, which shape opinion-makers, are thus well protected from 'undeserving riff-raff' by our professors-turned-bureaucrats. So why is everybody still worried about the ill effects of succumbing to the blackmail of the underprivileged?

Justice for Dalits Among Dalits

All the Ghosts Resurface

EPW, 16 July 2005

Distanced as they are from social realities, judges sometimes come up with wrong judgements at disastrously wrong moments.

A notable feature of Indian society in recent years is that from within the categories of disadvantaged people, who are treated as homogeneous classes both by the law as well as in terms of social justice (including dalits, minorities, women, etc), other categories have emerged, which have been alleging further discrimination and seeking to draw the attention of society to their plight. The situation thus calls for a sensitive response, which would neither perpetrate further discrimination against them nor use it as a stick to beat the parent category with.

The madiga campaign for subdivision of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) for the purpose of reservation in Andhra Pradesh is a very prominent instance of this phenomenon. Asserting that within the SCs, there is a local hierarchy of social status, worth, value (and even touchability), and also that the reservation for SCs is being availed of disproportionately by two of the castes, namely, the adi andhras and malas, the madigas ran a successful campaign to persuade the state government to make a fourfold subdivision of the SCs in the state, and to apportion the reservation to the four subgroups in such a manner as to permit each one of them to get a more equitable share. Almost nobody other than a section of the relatively better placed SCs has denied the fact of further discrimination within the dalit communities, and all political parties have supported the campaign.

However, the campaign has foundered on the law as understood by the courts. The conclusive (for the present) view of a Constitution Bench of five judges of the Supreme Court is that it is constitutionally impermissible to do what the madigas wanted. Why and how the court said so is discussed below. But as a general caveat, it must be said that irrespective of the defects in our Constitution, and there are many, anyone who is familiar with that document would view with scepticism any assertion of a disjoint between its prescriptions and an aspiration for social or political justice, on the one hand, and the social or political impediments in realising the constitutional possibilities. The only exception to this would be the aspiration for self-determination among unwilling components of the Indian nation, which is irrefutably unconstitutional, as the Constitution now stands.

The Andhra Pradesh Order

Persuaded by the vigorous campaign launched by the madigas, the government of Andhra Pradesh initially issued an order, which was struck down by a full bench of the high court, principally on the ground that the government had not consulted the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but also on more doubtful grounds. Later, after completing that consultation, the government passed an Act (Act 20 of 2000)[1] to the same effect. This too was challenged by persons of the mala and adi andhra communities, but a five-judge bench of the high court, upheld the Act by a majority of four to one, overruling the other objections expressed by the previous bench. Against that, the petitioners appealed to the Supreme Court, for which leave was granted by the high court, and eventually the petitioners succeeded in the apex court. In the case *E.V. Chinnaiah* vs *State of AP*, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court, has unanimously held the Act to be unconstitutional, in a judgement that is poor in terms of logic and poorer in terms of judicial wisdom.

The Supreme Court says two things: (1) Apportionment of reservation for SCs or STs to subgroups within them cannot be done by the state legislatures. Technically, only parliament has the competence to do so. (2) But even parliament does not have the authority to make these apportionments as the Constitution intends the SCs and STs to be treated as an indivisible, homogeneous entity. In reality, they may not be so, but for all constitutional purposes, they are.

Both the above contentions are demonstrably ill-founded. However, unt

[1] The Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes Rationalisation of Reservation Act.

a bench of at least seven judges of the Supreme Court says so, or the Constitution is amended to clarify that it has been saddled with what the makers of the document never intended, all aspirations for *inter se* justice within the dalit and adivasi groups—aspirations which are only now finding a voice—would have to stay mute, constitutionally speaking. In fact, the Supreme Court has gone to the extent of saying that it is not permissible to even appoint a commission of enquiry to identify the more backward among the SCs.

Three separate but concurring judgements have been written by the five-judge bench, none of them more edifying than the others: N. Santosh Hegde for himself, S.N. Variava and B.P. Singh; H.K. Sema for himself; and S.B. Sinha for himself. It is rather strenuous to unravel the thread of the reasoning adopted by them, not because it is profound, but because a lack of logical clarity and connectedness has become a very common characteristic of judicial pronouncements even at the highest level these days, and this judgment is a classic instance of this.

The constitutional position concerning the SC and ST lists (there is a separate list for each state) is clear. Article 341 says:

> (1) The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory, and where it is a State, in consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the castes, races, or tribes, or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes, which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be. (2) Parliament may by law include or exclude from the list of Scheduled Castes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

Article 342 offers a similar provision for STs. Thus, the president initially declares the list of SCs in consultation with the governors of the respective states, and any inclusion or exclusion thereafter is done by an Act of parliament. Except by an Act of parliament, the SC or ST list cannot be modified to include or exclude a caste. Every other authority, including the state and central governments, is bound by these lists so declared and amended.

Discretion of Authorities

However, subject to the acceptance of these lists as they stand, the granting of reservation or of any other special provisions is a wide discretion available to the authorities at all levels. This discretion contrasts sharply with the very clear investment of the power to declare a community to be SC or ST, with the president initially and parliament thereafter. The courts have repeatedly held that it requires no Act of any legislature to offer reservation or special provisions. Every instrumentality of the state and every local body is free to do so in the course of the exercise of its administrative authority, within the usual limits of fairness and reasonableness that apply to all governmental action.

Why should not this discretion also include the power to divide the special provisions it offers the beneficiaries in such a way as to ensure that it is more equitably accessed by them? No caste has been added to or deleted from the SC/ST lists thereby. Both the lists have remained intact. If not every authority, the state executive and legislature certainly have this power since they have the power to administer and legislate in connection with the issues of education, employment and social welfare. The Supreme Court says no, because the constitutional provision that only parliament can add to or delete from the SC/ST lists means much more than what it says. It means (in the words of Santosh Hegde) that any action that 'interferes, disturbs, rearranges, regroups or reclassifies the various castes in the list' unless it is an Act of parliament is barred by the Constitution. How does the court read so much into the plain language of Article 341? The Supreme Court is no Humpty-Dumpty to make words mean what it wants them to mean. It must obey and follow the meaning of the expressions themselves. Where the expressions are clear, it has no discretion to add or subtract anything. It is only where the expressions are obscure or otherwise of doubtful meaning that the court needs to step in, not to give them the meaning it wishes to ascribe to them but to elicit what the lawmakers may have originally meant. There is nothing whatsoever obscure or doubtful about Article 341.

It is true that legal theory holds that the interpretation of the Constitution is different from the interpretation of ordinary law, and that the Constitution must be interpreted liberally, broadly, and in a manner suitable for the changing times and social needs. This is not the place to initiate a discussion of that seemingly attractive proposition, though one is entitled to be suspicious of the sudden eruption of respect for changing times in usually conservative circles ever since the rise of neoliberalism. But whatever that proposition means, it cannot mean that the Supreme Court will rewrite the Constitution. Briefly, it may be said that words used in the Constitution which are in the nature of *concepts* or *generalities* can be and must be accorded a meaning while keeping the changed circumstances, hopes and aspirations in view.

The wide meaning that the courts have sought to give to the abstract noun 'life' in Article 21 is an instance. But plain words, which lay down who can do what and how, cannot be ascribed any other than their literal interpretation, since we do not want the judges to rewrite the Constitution to suit their views and values. One major criticism of the only Constituent Assembly we ever had is that it was not elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage. We do not want to have an unelected second such assembly now. In any case, if changing times are to be seen as the touchstone for reading constitutional provisions differently than what they seem to plainly say, then the most relevant change in this context would be the rising aspirations of the disadvantaged within the disadvantaged, and not the opposition of the more advantageously placed among them to the nascent grievance of those positioned below them.

Ambedkar's Observations

In support of the wide meaning that he has chosen to give Article 341, Santosh Hegde quotes an observation of Ambedkar's in the Constituent Assembly debates. When a question was raised as to why the president, who declares the list of SCs and STs, should not be given the power to add or delete communities from the list, and why that power should be given to parliament, Ambedkar is supposed to have said that it was to 'eliminate any kind of political factors having a play in the matter of the disturbance in the Schedule so published by the president'. Hegde relies upon the fact that Ambedkar used the expression 'disturbance' in this context, in order to draw the far-fetched inference that any disturbance, and not merely addition or deletion of a community, is included in the meaning of 'include or exclude' in Article 341(2). Ambedkar was talking of something else. He evidently apprehended that the president may act as an instrument of the party in power by adding or deleting communities from the SC/ST list, whereas even if the party in power has a majority in parliament, the very process of lawmaking with its debate and discussion would act as a check on mala fide politics. It is this problem that he was addressing and not the issue as to whether adding or deleting communities from the lists includes any and every 'disturbance'. A word used by a speaker can be ascribed meaning in relation to an issue only if that issue were present in the mind of the speaker when the word was used. The Supreme Court has, in recent times, laid down the proposition that it is permissible to look into the Constituent Assembly debates to understand the meaning of the provisions of the Constitution. That certainly does not mean that the sense of a word in relation to one context can be deduced from the use of the word in a different context in the debates.

The other and more portentous view of the Supreme Court is that the term Schedules Castes (SCs) represents a single class, and is a homogeneous expression, and, therefore, no further subgrouping within the SCs is permissible. The manner in which the reasoning in support of this view is elaborated, it would also apply to the STs. And it would also negate the power conceded to parliament in the first limb of the court's decision to make a classification of the SCs. It would make the regrouping unconstitutional, regardless of whether it was done by the state legislature or by parliament.

S.B. Sinha's concurring and lengthy judgement is entirely devoted to making this point, but one may read it backward and forward a dozen times and still not find any reason in it. He cites provisions of the Constitution wherein the STs of what we would today call the Northeast are treated differently from the STs of the rest of the country, and adds that this shows that where the Constitution wanted to make a sub-classification of the SCs or STs, it has itself done so, and, therefore, where it has chosen not to do so, such a classification is impermissible. All that it, in fact, proves is that inequality within the SCs or STs, in general, was not a given for the Constitution-makers in the same way as the peculiar history of the tribal areas of what was in those days known as Assam. Nothing more can reasonably be concluded from this, unless one intends to stultify the Constitution, which is exactly what the provisions seek to prevent when legal theory says that the interpretation of constitutional law proceeds on a somewhat different footing from that of the interpretation of ordinary law.

It is important to note that neither S.B. Sinha nor any of the other judges has expressed doubt about the state government's stand that there is inequality within the SCs and that the reservation provided for the SCs are being preponderantly availed of by a few of the fifty-nine communities listed as SCs in AP. It is better to reproduce this in S.B. Sinha's own language:

> It may not be necessary for us to delve deep into the question as to whether the factual foundation for enacting the said legislation being based on a report of a Court of Enquiry constituted under Section 3 of the Commissions of Enquiry Act, 1952 known as Justice Raju Report[2] is otherwise laudable or not.

[2] The Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission of Inquiry, appointed by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, examined whether a disproportionately large number of benefits had gone to any particular subcaste of the SCs. In its report in May 1997, the commission determined that a disproportionate distribution of reservation benefits were going in favour of the malas and adi andhras, and that the madigas and rellis were not adequately **represented**

A Question of Law

The question then is reduced to a pure question of law, which is whether it is permissible to identify subgroups of the SCs, which have derived little benefit from reservation and to allot their quota separately to them, leaving the residue as the quota of those who have benefited disproportionately. No, says the Supreme Court. Before seeing the reasons, here is a statement of the job undertaken by the Supreme Court, in the words of the same judge:

> The approach to construe the impugned legislation should not be based on the subjective intention of legislation but should be given an objective meaning. The meaning is declared by the courts after application of the relevant principles so as to construe the Constitutionality of a statute having regard to the object the Constitution makers sought to achieve.

What does one make of the expression 'subjective intention of legislation' in the above statement? It can only mean, if it means anything at all, the object of the legislation. Or is it the subjective intention of the legislature that the judge is referring to? But how can intention be anything other than subjective? One hears of subjective assessment of a fact, subjective taking of a decision, subjective exercise of discretionary powers. In these matters, the antinomy of subjective and objective makes sense. But there can be no objective intention. Conversely, what could be the 'objective meaning' of legislation? What the judge wants to say perhaps is that irrespective of whatever the legislature may have intended in enacting the law, his job is to examine its power to do so under the Constitution, in the light of the object that the Constitution-makers sought to achieve by defining SCs and making special provisions for them.

Alleged Impermissibility

Here are some of the reasons offered by S.B. Sinha for holding that such a power does not exist:

> Our Constitution permits application of equality clause by grant of additional protection to the disadvantaged class so as to bring them on equal platform with other advantaged class of people. Such a class which requires the benefit of additional protection, thus, cannot be discriminated *inter se*, i.e., between one member of the said class and another only on a certain presupposition of some advancement by one group over other although both satisfy the tes of abysmal backwardness as also inadequate representation in public servic

either in public appointments or in educational institutions in proportion to their respective populations. It recommended categorising of the SCs into four groupings on a rational basis. This eventually led to the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes Rationalisation of Reservation Act of 2000.

The word 'presupposition' in the above statement is unfair. It is base on what the same judge has earlier described as the Justice Raju repor Having declared that it is not necessary to spend time on the factu foundation of that report, he cannot now use the expression 'presuppositio for the opinion based on that report. Moving then to the logic of the allege impermissibility, firstly, the *inter se* classification is not between individua but between clearly demarcated subgroups. These are separate castes, ha separate names, sometimes separate traditional occupations, and separa cultural practices. They do not intermarry, and the higher among them d not normally interdine with the lower. Thus, they are clearly demarcat groups. As regards the provision of reservation in employment, it is, aft all, the whole purpose of Article 16(4) to provide reservation for Backwa Classes who are inadequately represented in the civil services:

> Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any provisi for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any Backwa Class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequate represented in the services under the State.

Having identified fifty-nine castes as SCs and having found that th are inadequately represented in the civil services, the Constitution-make have provided reservation for them in government jobs. But after a whi it is found that some of the fifty-nine castes continue to be under-represent in the services under the state because the reservation given in the name all of them has been taken to a disproportionate extent by some of the Cannot Article 16(4) then be pressed into service? If it is said that it cann then the power given under Article 16(4) is declared to be curtailed by t supposed bar read by the court into Article 341. Is it permissible to rea plainly worded power in the Constitution, that too one in the Fundamen Rights chapter, in such a manner that it is limited by a judic interpretation—and a somewhat strained one at that—of another provisi of the Constitution, stated below?

> As the Constitution itself treats the members of the Scheduled Castes a single integrated class of most backward citizens, it is not competent for Legislature of a State to subdivide them into separate compartments wit separate percentage of reservation for each resulting in discouraging m as well as the endeavour of individual members to excel—vide fundame duty under Article 51-A(j).

The latter part of the above stipulation is a position that tends against reservation itself. Indeed, as argued at the end of this article, this judgement is, in truth, a view against reservation as such, though apparently only about the impermissibility of subdividing reservation for SCs. The fact that the victorious sections of the dalits are unable to see this point is a tragedy by itself. While opposing the policy of reservation, the upper castes have always argued that they discourage merit and the endeavour to excel. The courts have for decades resisted this argument with cogent reasons. Is it permissible to use this argument now to oppose the subdivision of reservation?

As for the Constitution treating members of the SCs as 'a single integrated class of most backward citizens', that is what needs to be demonstrated, not proclaimed. Where does the Constitution say so? In the judgment written by Santosh Hegde too, one finds this syllogistic conundrum: SCs are the backwardmost in society. If you say that some of them are more backward than the others, then that means that the less backward among them can no longer be among the most backward in society, because there are some who are more backward than them. Ergo, the SCs cannot be divided into the more and the less backward, since by definition they are all the most backward.

Syllogistic Conundrum

Nowhere does the Constitution say that the SCs are the most backward in society, which is the proposition with which this syllogism starts. The Constitution does not define SCs in social terms at all. SCs are those who find themselves in the SC list, as declared by the president and amended from time to time by parliament. If a social indicator of what would constitute SC is needed, one can look into the debates in the Constituent Assembly, as the courts have frequently been doing to ascertain the meaning assigned to terms used in the Constitution. Or one can study the administrative practice for identifying the SCs. It would then be found that SCs are none but 'panchamas'—the untouchables of Hindu society. Everybody knows this, but in the reams and reams of judicial exposition available on the matter, the courts have, for some reason, found it impossible to say so, though V.R. Krishna Iyer, in his significant judgment in *State of Kerala* vs *N.M. Thomas*, 1976, consistently refers to SCs as 'harijans' (the word 'dalit' had not come into vogue then).

The fact that the SCs are the backwardmost among all other castes is an evaluation of their social status, but what, in fact, defines them is untouchability. Indeed, in many states, there are some communities listed in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) list, who may well be socially more backward than the SCs, such as the dommaras of Andhra Pradesh, but they are not included in the SC list because they are not untouchable.

The 1976 Judgment

The description of SCs as the backwardmost (the most backward), or the abysmally backward is owed to the Supreme Court itself, and in a very different context. The case of *State of Kerala* vs *N.M. Thomas*,[3] also comprises a Constitution Bench judgement scripted by seven judges, each of whom wrote his own judgment. All these judges, especially V.R. Krishna Iyer, made a conscious attempt to clear much of the confusion that had gathered around the policy of reservation, thanks to the inhibitions that clogged the conservative minds that have always ruled the courts. In the course of this attempt, Krishna Iyer used many expressions, inclined as he was to literary largesse, indicating the position and situation of the SCs: 'lowliest and the lost', 'utterly depressed', 'stark backwardness', 'bottom layer', 'most backward classes', 'sunken sections', are among those expressions. He carried on the exposition in the case of *Akhil Bharatiya Soshit Karamchari Sangh (Rly)* vs *Union of India*,[4] where he said even more plainly that the SCs are 'not merely backward but the backwardmost'. This rhetorical device, used as an expository technique to emphasise the justification for special provisions, seems to have later become definitive of SCs, and has now been used to put down the more disadvantaged among them. But the same judge, in the case of *State of Kerala* vs *N.M. Thomas*, regularly used the word 'harijan' to describe the SCs, which could equally have been taken as definitive of that category, which would have been closer to the intention of the makers of the Constitution and administrative practice. And then the syllogism which prohibits subgrouping and apportionment of the SC quota would no longer operate. Since it has been found that some untouchables are untouchable for the other untouchables, why should the former not be classified separately within the list of untouchables, and if such a classification is done, what would be unreasonable about it?

The alternative contention that the SCs constitute a 'homogeneous class', a 'single integrated class', a 'single class by themselves', and, therefore, cannot be grouped is even less tenable. Here are some of the elements of juridical wisdom found in the judgement:

[3] AIR 1976 SC 490.

[4] (1981) 1 SSC 246.

> It is a well-settled principle in law that reservation to a Backward Class is not a Constitutional mandate. It is the prerogative of the State concerned if it so desires, with an object of providing opportunity of advancement in the society to certain Backward Classes, which includes the Scheduled Castes, to reserve certain seats in educational institutions under Article 15(4) and in public services under the State under Article 16(4). That part of its Constitutional obligation, as stated above, has already been fulfilled by the State. Having done so, it is not open to the State to sub-classify a class already recognised by the Constitution and allot a portion of the already reserved quota among the State-created sub-classes within the list of Scheduled Castes [Santosh Hegde].

The granting of reservation is said to be not a constitutional mandate but a discretionary prerogative of the state. But once it is exercised in relation to a class recognised by the Constitution, the prerogative is lost, and the discretion is gone, insofar as it concerns subdividing the allotted reservation among groups within the class. But why? The Constitution recognises the class, namely, the SCs, in the sense that it is conscious that there are certain very specially placed peoples in our society who need to be endowed with special rights, and shown special concern by the administration. It is left to the president to declare the list of those people and to parliament to amend it from time to time. The choice of measures to be taken for their advancement or protection is the prerogative of the state. It is the discretion of the state to adopt such special measures as it would like, to realise the intention of the Constitution-makers in the matter. Where does the Constitution warrant putting a full stop to this prerogative after the state has made provision for the class as a whole, as long as the state does not add or delete castes from the list? Where is the state barred from examining who is taking what is given for the class as a whole, and doing something reasonable to set that right?

> The whole basis of reservation is to provide additional protection to the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as a class of persons who have been suffering since a considerable length of time due to social and educational backwardness. The protection and reservation is afforded to a homogeneous group... By the impugned legislation, the State has sought to regroup the homogeneous group specified in the Presidential notification for the purpose of reservation and appointments. It would amount to discrimination in reverse and would attract the wrath of Article 14 of the Constitution. It is a trite law that justice must be equitable. Justice to one group at the cost of injustice to other group is another way of perpetuating injustice H.K. Sema.

Argument Against Equity

It is indeed desirable that justice must be equitable. But the rider that 'justice to one group at the cost of injustice to another group is another way of perpetuating injustice', without any reference to the unequal position of the two groups, which fact is nowhere disbelieved by the judge, is not an argument for but against equity. It is an argument against reservation as such, and not just the categorisation of reservation, for 'justice to some at the cost of injustice to the others' has ever been the rallying cry of anti-reservationists. If one is to talk of discrimination in reverse, it is the court's injunction against classifying the lesser among the dalits separately for the purpose of allotting their quota to them which deserves the appellation. For have the same courts not held again and again that not making a classification when it cries out to be made amounts to treating unequals as equals, which would truly 'earn the wrath of Article 14'? It is strange that the judge thinks that it is the making of such a classification—whose factual basis, I must reiterate yet again, is not in dispute—which attracts such wrath.

> The power of the State Legislature to decide as regards grant of benefit of reservation in jobs or in educational institutions to the Backward Classes is not in dispute. It is furthermore not in dispute that if such a decision is made, the State can also lay down a Legislative policy as regards extent of reservation to be made for different members of the Backward Classes including Scheduled Castes. But it cannot take away the said benefit on the premise that one or the other group amongst the members of the Scheduled Castes has advanced and, thus, is not entitled to the entire benefit of reservation S.B. Sinha.

The first two sentences in the above are unexceptionable. Indeed, that would suffice to uphold the law passed by the Andhra Pradesh legislature. What is difficult to even make sense of is the last sentence. That should occasion no surprise since we have already seen more than one example of the judge's free-flowing use of the language of the court. To answer it as best as one can, it must be pointed out that the benefit of reservation is not taken away from anyone by the subgrouping effected by the law. The law does not identify a creamy layer among the SCs to be divested of the right of reservation. But if one group amongst the SCs has advanced so much that it is taking 'the entire benefit of the reservation' (or much of it), then why can that situation not be remedied? How can any one group be 'entitled to the entire benefit of reservation' given to a whole class, and that too as a matter of right? Why cannot that opportunity be taken away?

However, S.B. Sinha has another objection. He says that the provision

of reservation is subject to Article 335 of the Constitution, which says that the claims of SCs and STs to posts in the services must be taken into consideration consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of the administration. He adds that '[this would] lead to the conclusion that the same cannot be done to favour less [it should be more] weak sections, i.e., some castes out of the homogeneous class of Scheduled Castes.' Once again, this is a view—the third one that I have listed—which hits at reservation as such, and not just their subdivision. The courts have never accepted Article 335 as a complete bar to reservation, but S.B. Sinha finds it sufficient reason to bar the granting of a separate quota to the more backward among the SCs.

'Homogeneous' Class?

Let us finally examine what the Constitution itself says in definition of the SCs, and how 'homogeneous' the class is in the view of the Constitution. Article 341 has been cited above. It speaks of 'castes, races, tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races and tribes', which the President, in consultation with each state governor, notifies, and which shall thereupon for the purpose of the Constitution be deemed to be SCs. The existence of castes, races, tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races and tribes certainly does not indicate much homogeneity. The only thing that makes it homogeneous is that all of them are untouchables. What would be surprising if some of the castes, races, tribes or parts or groups thereof are in a position to take the full benefit of what is given collectively to all of them? And if that happens, why should it be assumed that the Constitution, which has revealed the awareness that untouchability has diverse social origins, prohibits subdivision of the reservation so that all of the intended beneficiaries derive some benefit?

In answer, apart from the pronouncements of homogeneity that abound in the three separate and concurring judgements, a precedent is offered by Santosh Hegde, by misreading Murtaza Fazal Ali and misquoting V.R. Krishna Iyer both, in the case of *State of Kerala* vs *N.M. Thomas*. That judgment signified the first time that a broad view, befitting the better aspect of the Constitution, was taken by the majority of a Constitution Bench in the matter of reservation. The judges found themselves answering the objection that since Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence, the 'Backward Class' of persons to whom reservation in government services can be given by virtue of Article 16(4) cannot be a caste or castes, it can only be a class.

Today it is commonplace that if a caste, say the caste of toddy-tappers, is identified as a Backward Class for the purpose of Article 16(4), then it does not amount to giving reservation to a caste. It only means that toddy-tappers have been found to be a Backward Class by virtue of some rational criteria of backwardness, and are given reservation as such. A caste, after all, is a class in the common sense meaning that it is a clearly defined group that is, for all practical purposes, well demarcated from the rest of society. If it is found to be backward according to some objective and rational criteria, then it can be the recipient of reservation or other special provisions, without facing the objection that there is discrimination in favour of a caste. It took time for the courts to arrive at this formulation, which accounts for the tortured language employed by the courts in the process.

V.R. Krishna Iyer says in the case of *State of Kerala* vs *N.M. Thomas*:

> A bare reading [of Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution] brings out the quintessential concept that they [Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes] are no castes in the Hindu fold but an amalgam of castes, races, groups, tribes, communities thereof found on investigation to be the lowliest and in need of massive State aid and notified as such by the President. To confuse this backward-most social composition with *castes* is to commit a Constitutional error, misled by a compendious appellation. So that, to protect Harijans is not to prejudice any *caste* but to promote citizen solidarity. Article 16(2) is out of the way and to extend protective discrimination to this mixed bag of tribes, castes, races, groups, communities and non-castes outside the fourfold Hindu division is not to compromise with the acceleration of castelessness enshrined in the sub-Article. The discerning sense of the Indian Corpus Juries has generally regarded Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, not as caste but as a large backward group deserving of societal compassion.

Santosh Hegde quotes these lines, correcting the word 'they' in line 2 above as 'there' for no reason at all except that it suits his view, and says:

> According to Justice Krishna Iyer, though there are no castes, races, groups, tribes, communities, or parts thereof in Hinduism, the President on investigation having found some of the communities within the amalgam as being lowliest and in need of massive State aid included them in one class called the Scheduled Castes. The sequitor thereof is that Scheduled Castes are one class for the purposes of the Constitution.

It is absurd to claim that V.R. Krishna Iyer or anybody for that matter could have held that there are no castes, tribes, groups, etc, within Hinduism. It merely serves the purpose of drawing the conclusion that from out of the

'amalgam' (of what?) called Hinduism, the president has picked out the lowliest who are in need of massive state assistance and made out of them the class called Scheduled Castes, which is, therefore, an undifferentiated, indivisible class. Judicial reasoning could have sunk no lower.

Murtaza Fazal Ali from the same judgement is quoted by Santosh Hegde as having said: 'Thus in view of these provisions the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes have been given a special status in the Constitution and they constitute a class by themselves.' From this, it is again concluded that the communities included in the presidential list form a class by themselves and any 'division of these persons for any consideration' would amount to tinkering with the presidential list. It is intriguing to see the way in which the judge draws the conclusion of indivisibility from the mere fact that a group of persons constitute a class in themselves. No such conclusion automatically follows. Logical pathologies apart, to be a class, a group merely needs to be well defined and clearly demarcated from the others. Whether it is thereafter legitimately further classifiable into subgroups does not follow one way or the other from this circumstance. A reading of Murtaza Fazal Ali's judgement cited above shows that he was, in fact, only answering the objection stemming from Article 16(2), that making special provisions for the SCs amounts to giving preferential treatment in the name of caste. No conclusion about the further classifiability of the SCs follows from this judgement.

However, at the end, S.B. Sinha thinks that it is the rellis and adi andhras who are among the disadvantaged SCs as against the malas and madigas. The government's stand, on the other hand, is that the rellis and madigas have been inadequately served by reservation whereas the malas and adi andhras have benefited disproportionately from it. Anyway, acknowledging that this problem is real, S.B. Sinha says that apportioning a quota within reservation is not the solution. Instead, give them 'scholarships, hostel facilities, special coaching, etc', he says. This is the fourth time that we find a line of reasoning in the judgment, which is against reservation as such and not merely against a quota within reservation. It has always been the argument of upper caste anti-reservationists that the government may provide the Backward Classes with scholarships, hostel facilities, free books, etc, but should not cut into their monopoly in colleges and offices.

Against Reservation

At the end, what we have is a judgement purportedly against subdivision of the Scheduled Castes reservation quota, but which is, in fact, replete with arguments against the policy of reservation as such. A little more than a decade ago, in the Mandal Commission case (*Indira Sawhney* vs *Union of India*),[5] nine judges of the Supreme Court examined the whole gamut of the reservation question and answered all the issues, affirming some earlier judgements, overruling some, and laying down the law in quite a satisfactory manner. It was hoped that most of the ghosts that have haunted the provision of reservation/special provisions for the oppressed castes of Hindu society had been laid to rest. Apparently not. But then, what more can one expect when a section of the dalits themselves go to court against those below them, and employ all the arguments that the brahmins invented against reservation and special provisions for the deprived castes as such? Did they not ask for it? Did they not lay it open to the court to once again happily walk over what in law would be called 'covered ground'?

Everyone in Andhra Pradesh recalls the glee with which casteist society welcomed the arguments used by the malas against the demand raised by the madigas. In human affairs, there is, in general, nothing more calculated to please than the appropriation of your arguments by your own opponent in the innocent assumption that he is protecting the right obtained against you from an encroacher. And the tortuous reluctance with which the courts, like society and like judges, came to accept that India is a caste society and something should be done about it if we are ever to be a real democracy is evident from the history of the judicial pronouncements on reservation.

To the judges, one is tempted to read what a predecessor of theirs said two decades ago. In the case of *K.C. Vasanth Kumar* vs *State of Mysore*,[6] O. Chinnappa Reddy said something about how the Constitution of India, at least in its more positive aspect, may be read:

> We must also remember that we are expounding a Constitution born . . . of an anti-imperialist struggle, influenced by Constitutional instruments, events and revolutions elsewhere, in search of a better world, and wedded to the idea of justice, economic, social and political to all. Such a Constitution must be given a generous interpretation so as to give all its citizens the full measure of the justice promised by it.

This probably sounds terribly like twentieth-century discourse, but it was twentieth-century aspirations that shaped the Republic of India, and there is no cogent reason for declaring that republic dead.

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[5] AIR 1993 SC 477.
[6] AIR 1985 SC 1495.

Ideology and Adjudication

The Supreme Court and OBC Reservation

EPW, 24 October 2009

The adjudication of public issues is an ideological act. Courts claim that they do their job within the four corners of the law, but the four corners are only corners. The space enclosed within these corners may be quite wide, and could permit divergent tendencies, with all of them passing for interpretations of the law or the Constitution. It is idle to pretend that this divergence is entirely the result of a difference in juridical character. Considerable politics is inherent in these divergent tendencies, especially when significant social issues are involved.

The vicissitudes of the law of reservation after the supposedly authoritative pronouncement in the Mandal Commission case (lawyers know it as *Indira Sawhney* vs *Union of India*) in 1992 constitute a classic instance of these divergent tendencies. That judgement of nine judges, with six of them concurring in upholding the provision of reservation to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) to the extent of 27 per cent in central government services, took a realistic view of caste as an institution of Indian society, its discriminatory character, the need to overcome it, and the role that special provisions such as reservation can play in that task.

The Supreme Court formulated and answered all the legal issues that have arisen over the years in connection with reservation under the Constitution. The judgment is one of common sense, and succeeds in summing up and trimming the rough edges of the positive content of judicial views expressed in the matter over the previous forty years, while going along with some of the retrogressive attitudes.

In retrospect, it is evident that the judgement did open up space for mischief by insisting on identifying something called 'a creamy layer' in every OBC community, and by expanding the space for judicial meddling by mandating a fact-finding enquiry of a public character into putative backwardness, to be undertaken by a statutory body. However, the judgement was, on the whole, as good a judicial pronouncement as one could expect within the tradition that views reservation as an instrument for equalising educational and employment opportunities at the threshold, while simultaneously being mindful of the supposed injury that it causes to administrative efficiency.

Reservation can be seen differently, as one instrument for equalising the status and position of castes considered as the basic communities of Hindu society, but courts have never seen it that way. Since judicial discipline demands that only a larger bench of judges can undo the result of any judgement, and since no bench larger than nine in size has gone into the question of reservation or any aspect of it after the Mandal Commission case, one would think that things stand at least where the Mandal Commission case left them. But in thinking this, one would be terribly mistaken. A sad fact about the Indian judiciary is that in cases where the judges have felt an urgent ideological compulsion, they have not let mere canons of discipline stop them. Judgements by much smaller benches than of nine judges have prised open what the nine-judge bench declared to be the law to such an extent—while paying lip service to their duty of obedience to it—that most of the issues are again open for rewriting.

A case in point is that of *Ashoka Kumar Thakur* vs *Union of India*, a judgement which is now at the centre of controversy because its effect has been that seats in central educational institutions, supposedly increased to meet the newly created reservation of 27 per cent for OBCs, have turned into a bonanza of extra seats for the upper castes. The reference to a bench of five judges was itself unnecessary in this case.

Judicial Indiscipline

The order of reference by the two-judge bench of Arijit Pasayat and Lokeshwar Singh Panta is a textbook case of judicial indiscipline. A long list of questions (thirty-one, if you want the number) were raised, almost all of which were answered in the Mandal Commission case and indeed even much before that, and were asked to be answered by a Constitution Bench. The only question that may have justified such reference (that too

only because of unthinking judicial pronouncements in the recent past) was whether parliament can, by law, direct private educational institutions to provide reservation for OBCs, which question was finally not answered (except by one of the five judges) on the ground that there was no challenge from private educational institutions.

When the majority of the five-judge bench came to that conclusion, they should have returned the reference instead of answering it, because there was never any doubt that the government can provide for reservation under the Constitution to OBCs in educational institutions owned or financially aided by it. Instead, the blanket order of reference was used by three of the five judges (Arijit Pasayat himself, C.K. Thakker and Dalveer Bhandari) to read the Mandal Commission judgement tendentiously, genuflecting with due respect, but glossing over it in a manner that leaves the door open for a reversal in good time. In this case, it is easy to see conduct that is most objectionable in juridical terms, but what is more significant is the ideological underpinning of the indiscipline and its effect.

The significance of the 'creamy layer' is an instance of what they have achieved. In the Mandal Commission judgement, the court performed the strange feat of deducing a fact from an abstract principle, and declared that there exists a creamy layer in each OBC community, and it must be excluded from the benefit of reservation given to that community so that the really backward among the backward may not be deprived of the benefits of special provisions. The reasoning proceeds thus: unequals must not be treated as equals; hence the well-endowed among an OBC community cannot be counted with the less endowed ones; hence, they must be disentitled to the reservation provision made for that community in the interests of justice; hence, it is necessary to identify the creamy layer in each community and declare it ineligible for the reservation given to that community. The question as to whether there, in fact, exists a creamy layer as a subclass within the OBC communities, and if so, in which of them, and what its effect is on the benefit of reservation availed of by members of the community, and whether, for instance, it has imparted confidence to the others to aspire for higher positions in life rather than come in the way of their advancement, were matters of no relevance to this process of deductive reasoning.

Nevertheless, by the time the Mandal Commission case came up, caste as a social category had come to be accepted by the courts as a class of a kind, eligible for reservation if it is backward. *Ashoka Kumar Thakur* vs *Union of India* (the judgement was pronounced on 10 April 2008), through the said three judges, introduces the following revision: caste becomes a

class only after the creamy layer is removed. Thus, the removal of the creamy layer is no longer a matter of purported justice within the community as between the more backward and the less backward amongst it, as it was in the Mandal Commission case, but a necessary prerequisite for the caste to at all be a class, and *a fortiori* a Backward Class. This is a very significant conceptual revision, effected silently by the majority of this five-judge bench in a reference that was unnecessary in the first place.

Another instance is the way in which the same three judges have smuggled in the 'economic criterion' for identifying BCs. They were not called upon to decide whether caste can be the basis for determining backwardness because after a lot of dilly-dallying, the courts, which began with the view that caste can be only one of the criteria to be taken into account to identify backwardness, have come round to the view that if a caste is, on the whole, backward, it can be identified as a BC, though there can also be other ways of identifying BCs. This opinion has been approved in the Mandal Commission case. But the three judges proceed gamely to pose and answer the same question, notwithstanding its finality (at least until more than nine judges sit and reconsider it), and give different answers, while declaring themselves to be bound by the Mandal Commission judgement. They express pain at the fact that poverty deprives people of opportunity to pursue studies and rise in life. It is, in general, remarkable that about the only time courts in our country have recognised the division of the country into poor and rich, and deplored this division, is when people have asked for caste-based reservation or rights. The courts are otherwise normally indifferent to economic cleavages in society. And they will not even learn from documented experience.

As far back as the 1960s, the government of the then state of Mysore, the 'native' part of which had had a systematic programme of providing encouragement to the nonbrahmin communities in terms of education and employment during the pre-Constitution era, strangely found itself stumbling upon the Constitution (as understood by the Supreme Court) in its effort to continue/extend the measures after India dedicated itself to social justice during the post-Constitution era. It, therefore, introduced poverty occupation-based reservation pending the success of its efforts to continue its programme, while satisfying the finicky stipulations of the court. Reviewing this attempt, the Backward Classes Commission headed by O. Chinnappa Reddy, which was later appointed by the successor state of Karnataka, found that it was the brahmins, the lingayats and the vokkaligas who took most of the benefits. The fact that this would happen would be obvious to anyone who knows anything about Indian society,

but judges remain determined admirers of the economic criterion. In *Ashoka Kumar Thakur* vs *Union of India*, Arijit Pasayat and C.K. Thakker have given the astonishing direction that 'to strike the Constitutional balance, it is necessary and desirable to earmark certain percentage of seats out of permissible limit of 27 per cent for socially and economically Backward Classes'. And Dalveer Bhandari directs that after ten years, the criterion for reservation must shift to the economically backward. Wanting in discipline or not, the effect of this judgement is that a majority of three out of the five judges in the bench are found to be pushing for the economic criterion in determining backwardness, which would find its utility with the kind of smooth-talking lawyers who are likely to populate the Supreme Court in the days to come.

Second, and this brings us to the present controversy, the judgement answers questions that nobody asked, which courts are not supposed to do but find themselves doing when they find governments doing what they do not like, not as judges but as political creatures. They were only supposed to be adjudging the constitutional validity of the 93rd Amendment, which has introduced Article 15(5) in the Constitution, enabling the government to make a special provision by law for the advancement of BCs insofar as it relates to admissions to educational institutions including private institutions, and the validity of the consequential law made by parliament, namely, the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admissions) Act, 2006.

In parenthesis, it may be recalled that when this policy of reservation was mooted, the upper castes, who enjoy a monopoly over higher education in the better type of institutions, kicked up a big fuss and blackmailed the government into compulsorily increasing the number of seats in every such institution so that the opportunities available to them would remain untouched. In other words, they refused to share the opportunities that they regard as theirs with the OBCs, and signalled to the government that it had better not force them to do so in its quest for real equality of opportunity. The fact that they succeeded in this blackmail but still went ahead and challenged the law is an index of the kind of elite that this country has. Now, this increase in both the number of seats and the consequent infrastructure is estimated to cost about Rs 17,000 crore. The blame for the expenditure must squarely be placed on the blackmailing tactics of the upper castes and the union government's weakness in succumbing to it. But the upper castes have generated an argument in their favour out of this expenditure: should Rs 17,000 crore be spent on implementing reservation in higher education when primary schooling is in very bad shape for want of funds? At least one of the judges, Dalveer Bhandari, found this crass hypocrisy impressive as an argument against the law.

Relaxing the Criteria

What the court was not called upon to answer is whether and to what extent the government or the educational institutions may relax the qualifying marks to enable the OBC students to gain access to the reservation, and what should be done if they fail to gain access to the seats in sufficient number. It has been the general experience that the first time reservation is provided to any social class, not many are able to gain access to this policy and a sufficient relaxation of the criterion of selection is needed to make reservation a reality. It is also a matter of experience that the relaxation would not be needed after a certain period of time. What should be done in this regard is a matter of government policy, and while the courts may be called upon to adjudicate the validity of a policy once it is formulated, it is not for them to say what it should be. But three judges thought otherwise. Arijit Pasayat and C.K. Thakker begin by properly asking the central government to 'examine the desirability of fixing cut-off marks in respect of candidates belonging to OBCs' but add the uninvited illustration that 'five grace marks may be added to OBC students'. They then go on to positively mandate that if any seats in the OBC quota remain vacant, they should be filled up by 'candidates from the general categories'. Dalveer Bhandari is more forthright. He orders that the qualifying cut-off marks may be reduced by not more than ten (out of 100) for the OBCs, but again if the qualifying OBC students fail to avail of the 27 per cent reservation, 'the remaining seats would revert to the general category'. These orders, which overstep the powers of the court, have now come home to roost, and in the process, have proved the vacuity of the loud lament about the creamy layer that is the most jarring note in the judgement—during this academic year, the 27 per cent OBC quota has remained largely unfilled in most of the central educational institutions.

To begin with, the central government took the initiative in leaving the policy to the institutions. The Ministry for Human Resources Development issued an office memorandum (OM) dated 20 April 2008, authorising the central educational institutions to 'fix cut-off marks for admission/selection through admission test, etc, for the OBC candidates with such differential from the cut-off marks for the unreserved category as each institution may deem appropriate for maintaining the standards of education and at the same time ensuring that sufficient number of eligible OBC candidates are

available'. Maybe the decision to leave it to the institutions was not very wise, for elite educational institutions are the most steeped in brahminical attitudes in our country. But good or bad, the OM still left it open so that means could be devised to prevent a sufficient number of OBC students from entering the institutions. However, the Supreme Court again came in the way without so much as acknowledging, let alone adjudicating, the policy decision taken by the union government. Someone moved the Supreme Court for a 'clarification' in the matter and the court, after hearing the government too, which must have informed it of the OM dated 20 April 2008, passed an order on 14 October, approving the policy pronouncement of Dalveer Bhandari, namely, relaxation of not more than ten marks in the qualifying cut-off marks and filling of unfilled seats by the general category, 'having regard to the observations made in the judgements pronounced by this court'. What observations? Only Dalveer Bhandari made such an observation. Arijit Pasayat and C.K. Thakker said something else. Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, whose contribution to the Ashoka Kumar Thakur case is scrupulous in following the sympathetic spirit of the Mandal Commission judgement, rightly avoided making any policy pronouncement. The last judge, R.V. Raveendran, who expressed an impossible agreement with all the other four, wrote a brief judgment, which too avoids the issue.

Yet, the same five judges sitting again endorse what was actually a policy made by judicial fiat by one of them, thereby implicitly overruling the government's policy decision without even referring to it. The result is that the upper castes, who earlier had much of the 100 per cent of the seats to themselves, now have more than 100 per cent. The urge that the courts, which remain a bastion of the upper castes, feel in the matter of pre-empting what they believe to be undesirable policy decisions in connection with reservation, is nowhere more evident.

It is not possible to conclude this article without commenting on the extraordinary interpretation put by the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) on the order of 14 October 2008 passed by the Supreme Court. It should be obvious to even a child that what the court said was that if a student in general has to get, say, forty marks in the qualifying test or interview or whichever combination of the two the institution prescribes, to be eligible for selection to a course, then in the case of OBCs, it would be sufficient if the candidate gets thirty marks. It takes exceptional intelligence to read it as anything else. But the selectors in JNU evidently possess such intelligence. A committee of five teachers concluded that what the Supreme Court meant when it spoke of relaxation of not more than ten in the cut-off marks was that the marks obtained by an OBC candidate must be within ten marks of the least marks obtained by those who have qualified in the general category for the OBC candidate to be eligible for selection! For sometime now, social scientists have been speaking a lot about the legitimacy of diverse 'readings' of 'texts' but one does hope that in JNU, they have not carried it to misreading of plain English!

APPENDIX

From Karamchedu (1985) to Chundur (1991)

Known incidents of murder or large-scale arson perpetrated against dalits, tribals and OBCs by caste Hindus in Andhra Pradesh

	Place of occurrence	Date	Nature of the incident
1	Karamchedu (Prakasam district)	17 July 1985	Six dalits killed and three dalit women raped in a mass assault by hundreds of men of the kamma caste. A politically active son-in-law of the then chief minister, N.T. Rama Rao, belongs to this village.
2	Hasnapur (Adilabad district)	13 June 1985 18 July 1985	Reddy landlords closely related to the MLA of Adilabad killed two youth of the dhobi and barber castes on these two days, respectively, for refusal to procure a prostitute on their demand.
3	Neerukonda (Guntur district)	15 July 1987	One elderly dalit murdered in a mob attack by men of the kamma community, close relatives of the then health minister in the AP government.
4	Gudiada (Vizianagaram district)	20 July 1987	One dalit labourer killed in a dispute over a small patch of tank-bed land by a mob of backward caste farmers led by a forward caste (raju) Congress leader.
5	Dontali (Nellore district)	27 August 1987	One person of a backward caste (golla) killed in a mob attack by kammas. He was instrumental in organising labourers.
6	Chirala (Prakasam district)	13 August 1987	A principal witness in the Karamchedu case, an elderly dalit woman, Alisamma, murdered by the Karamchedu killers.
7	Bandlapalli (Chittoor district)	27 August 1987	Four dalits beaten and stabbed to death in an assault by a group of reddy and other forward caste men in a dispute over half an acre of cultivable waste.
8	Kodavatikallu (Krishna district)	2 February 1988	A dalit farm-servant killed by kamma landlord for disobedience.
9	Beernakallu (Nellore district)	19 January 1989	A dalit, upa-sarpanch of the village, killed by goons hired by forward caste TDP men for having worked against them in elections.
10	Gokarajupalli (Krishna district)	16 January 1989	Dalit labourer killed by youth of kamma landlord families for coming in the way of their harassment of women.
11	Tangutur (Prakasam district)	3 March 1989	A dalit women raped and set on fire and killed by a TDP goon of kamma caste.
12	Jabbargudem (Rangareddy district)	27 April 1989	A dalit killed in a mass assault at the behest of a reddy landlord. Datits of this area have organised and fought for land, wages etc.
13	Pippara (West Godavari district)	4 June 1989	Dalit killed in a mass assault by forward castes (rajus) directed by a local Congress leader. Dalits had protested against molestation of dalit women by raju youth.
14	Chinakada (Vizianagaram district)	31 July 1989	Four tribals, a father and three sons, killed in a mass attack by savarna Hindus at the behest of a liquor contractor, for illicitly brewing and selling liquor.
15	Mandadam (Guntur district)	1987	Two erukala tribals abducted, tortured and killed by men of a fishing contractor for catching and selling fish on the sly.
16	Pulivendula (Cuddapah district)	16 February 1990	More than 150 houses of erukala tribes people set on fire and detonated by a mob of savarnas led by village sarpanch and Congress(I) leader, Y.S. Raja Reddy, father of prominent Congressman Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy.
17	Nakkalampeta (Krishna district)	19 March 1990	Dalit farmhand murdered by youth of landlord's household on suspicion of intimacy with a woman of the house.
18	Jeerupalem (Srikakulam district)	21 May 1990	About 180 houses of fishing community set on fire by a mob organised by prominent Congress(I) BC leader, big landlord, former minister and former chairman of Zilla Parishad—Gorle Sriramulu Naidu. The fishing community were fighting for return of seventy acres of their land grabbed by him.
19	Gutlapadu (West Godavari district)	19 May 1990	Two dalits killed in a mass assault by forward caste (kapu) men, numbering 200, for questioning their dominance.

	Place of occurrence	Date	Nature of the incident
20	Reddypalli (Rangareddy district)	12 February 1990	Erukala peasant burnt to death on the pretext of sorcery by reddy landlord close to local MLA for questioning the latter's dishonesty in a land deal.
21	Kothapulavandla-palli (Anantapur district)	6 June 1990	Dalit burnt alive by a mob of reddy and other castes for his rebellious attitude.
22	Vetlapalem (East Godavari district)	4 November 1990	Nearly a hundred houses of dalits set on fire and destroyed by kamma landlords-cum-mill owners in connection with a land dispute involving eighteen acres of tank-bed land.
23	Kaspa Gadabavalasa (Vizianagaram district)	22 November 1990	Four tribals and a dalit killed by a mob of caste Hindus in connection with a land dispute involving eighteen acres of land.
24	Chillakallu (Krishna district)	28 November 1990	A dalit sub-inspector of police shot himself dead unable to bear the casteist harassment of the forward caste (kapu) circle inspector, his immediate superior.
25	Moodurallapalli (Kurnool district)	18 March 1991	Dalit labourer beaten to death by reddys for protesting against harassment of his wife by a reddy.
26	Ambaripet (Adilabad district)	19 May 1991	A backward caste (boya) farmhand shot dead by his landlord, G. Narayana Reddy—Congress(I) leader, former MP, former zilla parishad chairman and big landholder.
27	Chundur (Guntur district)	6 August 1991	Seventeen dalits massacred by a large mob of reddy and some kapu men in a savage attack as a finale to a month-long period of conflict.
28	Gokarajupalli (Krishna district)	3 August 1991	Dalit labourer killed in continuation of the incident of 16 January 1989 (*see item 10 of this table*).

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